



BASEBALL JOE ON THE SCHOOL NINE

LESTER CHADWICK

TO OUR READERS

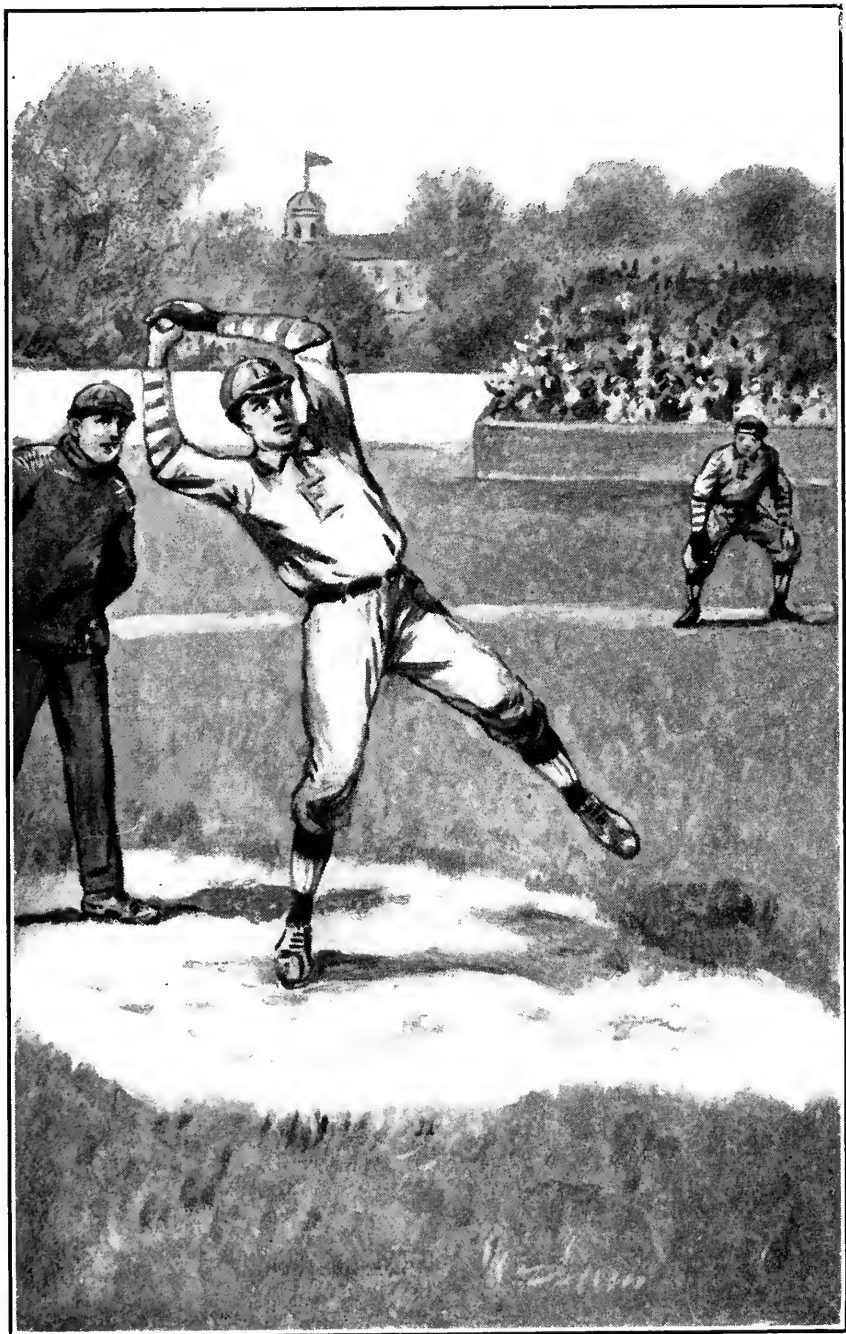
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THE NEXT MOMENT THE HORSEHIDE WENT SPEEDING
TOWARD THE PLATE.

Baseball Joe on the School Nine

OR

Pitching *for the* Blue Banner

By LESTER CHADWICK

AUTHOR OF
"BASEBALL JOE OF THE SILVER STARS," "THE
RIVAL PITCHERS," "A QUARTER-BACK'S PLUCK,"
"BATTING TO WIN," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED



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BOOKS BY LESTER CHADWICK

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Baseball Joe on the School Nine

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BASEBALL JOE ON THE SCHOOL NINE

CHAPTER I

HITTING A TEACHER

"LOOK out now, fellows; here goes for a high one!"

"Aw come off; you can't throw high without dislocating your arm, Peaches. Don't try it."

"You get off the earth; I can so, Teeter. Watch me."

"Let Joe Matson have a try. He can throw higher than you can, Peaches," and the lad who had last spoken grasped the arm of a tall boy, with a very fair complexion which had gained him the nickname of "Peaches and Cream," though it was usually shortened to "Peaches." There was a crowd of lads on the school grounds, throwing snowballs, when the offer of "Peaches" or Dick Lantfeld was made.

"Don't let him throw, Teeter," begged George Bland, jokingly.

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"I'll not," retorted "Teeter" Nelson, whose first name was Harry, but who had gained his appellation because of a habit he had of "teetering" on his tiptoes when reciting in class. "I've got Peaches all right," and there was a struggle between the two lads, one trying to throw a snowball, and the other trying to prevent him.

"Come on, Joe," called Teeter, to a tall, good-looking, and rather quiet youth who stood beside a companion. "Let's see you throw. You're always good at it, and I'll keep Peaches out of the way."

"Shall we try, Tom?" asked Joe Matson of his chum.

"Might as well. Come on!"

"Yes, let 'Sister' Davis have a whack at it too," urged George Bland. Tom Davis, who was Joe Matson's particular chum, was designated "Sister" because, in an incautious moment, when first coming to Excelsior Hall, he had shown a picture of his very pretty sister, Mabel.

Tom and Joe, who had come upon the group of other pupils after the impromptu snowball throwing contest had started, advanced further toward their school companions. Peaches and Teeter were still engaged in their friendly struggle, until Peaches tripped over a stone, concealed

under a blanket of snow, and both went down in a struggling heap.

"Make it a touchdown!" yelled George Bland.

"Yes, shove him over the line, Peaches!" cried Tom.

"Hold him! Hold him!" implored Joe, and the little group of lads, which was increased by the addition of several other pupils, circled about the struggling ones, laughing at their plight.

"D-d-down!" finally panted Peaches, when Teeter held his face in the soft snow. "Let me up, will you?"

"Promise not to try to throw a high one?" asked Teeter, still maintaining his position astride of Peaches.

"Yes—I—I guess so."

"That doesn't go with me; you've got to be sure."

"All right, let a fellow up, will you? There's a lot of snow down my neck."

"That's what happened to me the last time you fired a high snowball, Peaches. That's why I didn't want you to try another while I'm around. You wait until I'm off the campus if you've got to indulge in high jinks. Come on now, fellows, since Peaches has promised to behave himself, let the merry dance go on. Have you tried a shot,

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Joe? Or you, Sister," and Teeter looked at the newcomers.

"Not yet," answered Joe Matson with a smile. "Haven't had a chance."

"That's right," put in Tom Davis. "You started a rough-house with Peaches as soon as we got here. What's on, anyhow?"

"Oh, we're just seeing how straight we can aim with snowballs," explained Teeter. "See if you can hit that barrel head down there," and he pointed to the object in question, about forty yards away on the school campus.

"See if you can hit the barrel, Joe," urged George Bland. "A lot of us have missed it, including Peaches, who seems to think his particular stunt is high throwing."

"And so it is!" interrupted the lad with the clear complexion. "I can beat any one here at——"

"Save that talk until the baseball season opens!" retorted Teeter. "Go ahead, Joe and Tom. And you other fellows can try if you like," he added, for several more pupils had joined the group.

It might seem easy to hit the head of a barrel at that distance, but either the lads were not expert enough or else the snowballs, being of irregu-

lar shapes and rather light, did not carry well. Whatever the cause, the fact remained that the barrel received only a few scattering shots and these on the outer edges of the head.

"Now we'll see what Sister Davis can do!" exclaimed Nat Pierson, as Joe's chum stepped up to the firing line.

"Oh, I'm not so much," answered Tom with a half smile. "Joe will beat me all to pieces."

"Joe Matson sure can throw," commented Teeter, in a low voice to George Bland. "I remember what straight aim he had the last time we built a fort, and had a snow fight."

"I should say yes," agreed George. "And talk about speed!" he added. "Wow! One ball he threw soaked me in the ear. I can feel it yet!" and he rubbed the side of his head reflectively.

The first ball that Tom threw just clipped the upper rim of the barrel head, and there were some exclamations of admiration. The second one was a clean miss, but not by a large margin. The third missile split into fragments on the rim of the head.

"Good!" cried Peaches. "That's the way to do it!"

"Wait until you see Joe plug it," retorted Tom with a smile.

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"Oh, I'm not such a wonder," remarked our hero modestly, as he advanced to the line. In his hand he held three very hard and smooth snowballs, which he spent some time in making in anticipation of his turn to throw. "I haven't had much practice lately," he went on, "though I used to throw pretty straight when the baseball season was on."

Joe carefully measured with his eye the distance to the barrel. Then he swung his arm around a few times to "limber up."

"That fellow used to pitch on some nine, I'll wager," said Teeter in a whisper to Peaches.

"Yes, I heard something about him being a star on some small country team," was the retort. "But let's watch him."

Joe threw. The ball left his hand with tremendous speed and, an instant later, had struck the head of the barrel with a resounding "ping!"

"In the centre! In the centre!" yelled Peaches with enthusiasm as he capered about.

"A mighty good shot!" complimented Teeter, doing his particular toe stunt.

"Not exactly in the centre," admitted Joe. "Here goes for another."

Once more he threw, and again the snowball

hit the barrel head, close to the first, but not quite so near the middle.

"You can do better than that, Joe," spoke Tom in a low voice.

"I'm going to try," was all the thrower said.

Again his arm was swung around with the peculiar motion used by many good baseball pitchers. Again the snowball shot forward, whizzing through the air. Again came that resounding thud on the hollow barrel, this time louder than before.

"Right on the nose!"

"A clean middle shot!"

"A good plunk!"

These cries greeted Joe's last effort, and, sure enough, when several lads ran to get a closer view of the barrel, they came back to report that the ball was exactly in the centre of the head.

"Say, you're a wonder!" exclaimed Peaches, admiringly.

"Who's a wonder?" inquired a new voice, and a tall heavily-built lad, with rather a coarse and brutal face, sauntered up to the group. "Who's been doing wonderful stunts, Peaches?"

"Joe Matson here. He hit the barrel head three times out of three, and the best any of us

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could do was once. Besides, Joe poked it in the exact centre once, and nearly twice."

"That's easy," spoke the newcomer, with a sneer in his voice.

"Let's see you do it, Shell," invited George Bland.

"Go on, Hiram, show 'em what you can do," urged Luke Fodick, who was a sort of toady to Hiram Shell, the school bully, if ever there was one.

"Just watch me," requested Hiram, and hastily taking some hard round snowballs away from a smaller lad who had made them for his own use, the bully threw.

I must do him the credit to say that he was a good shot, and all three of his missiles hit the barrel head. But two of them clipped the outer edge, and only one was completely on, and that nowhere near the centre.

"Joe Matson's got you beat a mile!" exclaimed Peaches.

"That's all right," answered Hiram with the easy superior air he generally assumed. "If I'd been practicing all day as you fellows have I could poke the centre every time, too."

As a matter of fact, those three balls were the first Joe had thrown that day, but he did not think

it wise to say so, for Hiram had mean ways about him, and none of the pupils at Excelsior Hall cared to rouse his anger unnecessarily.

"Well, I guess we've all had our turns," spoke George Bland, after Hiram had thrown a few more balls so carelessly as to miss the barrel entirely.

"I haven't," piped up Tommy Burton, one of the youngest lads. "Hiram took my snowballs."

"Aw, what of it, kid?" sneered the bully. "There's lots more snow. Make yourself another set and see what you can do."

But Tommy was bashful, and the attention he had thus drawn upon himself made him blush. He was a timid lad and he shrank away now, evidently fearing Shell.

"Never mind," spoke Peaches kindly, "we'll have another contest soon and you can be in it."

"Let's see who can throw the farthest," suggested Hiram. His great strength gave him a decided advantage in this, as he very well knew.

The other boys also knew this, but did not like to refuse to enter the lists with him, so the long-distance throwing was started. Hiram did throw hard and far, but he met his match in Joe Matson, and the bully evidently did not like it. He sneered

at Joe's style and did his best to beat him, but could not.

"I ate too much dinner to-day," said Hiram finally, as an excuse, "so I can't throw well," and though there were covert smiles at this palpable excuse, no one said anything. Then came other contests, throwing at trees and different objects. Finally Hiram and Luke took themselves off, and everyone else was glad of it.

"He's only a bluff, Shell is!" murmured Peaches.

"And mean," added George.

"Joe, I wonder if you can throw over those trees," spoke Tom, pointing to a fringe of big maples which bordered a walk that ran around the school campus. "That's something of a throw for height and distance. Want to try?"

"Sure," assented our hero, "though I don't know as I can do it."

"Wait, I'm with you," put in Peaches. "We'll throw together."

They quickly made a couple of hard, smooth balls, and at the word from Tom, Joe and Peaches let go together, for it was to be a sort of contest in swiftness.

The white missiles sailed through the air side by side, and not far apart. Higher and higher

they went, until they both topped the trees, and began to go down on the other side. Joe's was far in advance of the snowball of Peaches, however, and went higher.

As the balls descended and went out of sight, there suddenly arose from the other side of the trees a series of expostulating yells.

"Stop it! Stop that, I say! How dare you throw snowballs at me? I shall report you at once! Who are you? Don't you dare to run!"

"We—we hit some one," faltered Peaches, his fair complexion blushing a bright red.

"I—I guess we did," admitted Joe.

There was no doubt of it a moment later, for through the trees came running a figure whose tall hat was battered over his head by the snowballs, some fragments of the missiles still clinging to the tile.

"You sure did," added Teeter, stiffling a laugh. "And of all persons in the school but Professor Rodd. Oh my! Oh wow! You're in for it now! He won't do a thing to you fellows! Look at his hat! Here he comes!"

Professor Elias Rodd, one of the strictest and certainly the "fussiest" instructor at Excelsior, was hurrying toward the group of boys.

CHAPTER II

PLANNING A BATTLE

PROFESSOR ELIAS RODD was rather elderly, and, as he never took much exercise, his sprinting abilities were not pronounced. So it took him about a minute and a half to cross the campus to where the little group of lads awaited him—anxious waiting it was too, on the part of Joe and Peaches. And in that minute and a half, before the excitement begins, I want to take the opportunity to tell you something about Joe Matson, and his chum Tom Davis, and how they happened to be at Excelsior Hall.

Those of you who have read the first volume of this series entitled, "Baseball Joe of the Silver Stars," need no introduction to our hero. Sufficient to say that he was a lad who thought more of baseball than of any other sport.

Joe was the son of Mr. and Mrs. John Matson, and he had a sister named Clara. Joe's father was an inventor of farming machinery and other

apparatus, and had been employed by the Royal Harvester Works of Riverside, which was located on the Appleby River, in one of our New England States. Joe lived in Riverside, his family having moved there from Bentville.

In the previous story I told how Joe made the acquaintance of Tom Davis, who lived in the house back of him. Joe became interested in the Silver Stars, the Riverside amateur nine, and through doing a favor for Darrell Blackney, the manager, was given a position in the field.

But Joe wanted to become a pitcher, and, in fact, had pitched for the Bentville Boosters. He longed to fill the box for the Stars, and was finally given a chance. But he had incurred the enmity of Sam Morton, the regular pitcher, and there were several clashes between them. Finally Joe displaced Sam and won many games for the Stars.

Mr. Matson had some trouble with his inventions, for Isaac Benjamin, manager of the harvester works, and Rufus Holdney, the latter once a friend of the inventor, determined to get certain valuable patents away from Mr. Matson. How they nearly succeeded, and how Joe foiled the plans of the plotters once, is told in the first book.

Though Joe aided his father considerably, the

young pitcher never lost his interest in baseball, and when, at the last moment, word came that Mr. Matson had seemingly lost everything, Joe hid his own feelings and went off to pitch the deciding championship game against the Resolutes of Rocky Ford, the bitter rivals of the Silver Stars.

Joe's heart was heavy as he pitched, for he knew that if his father lost his money through the taking away of his patents there would be no chance of his going to boarding school, and Joe desired that above everything.

But he pluckily pitched the game, which was a close and hot one. He won, making the Stars the champions of the county league; and then Joe hurried home.

To his delight there was a message from his father, stating that at the last minute unexpected evidence had won the patent case for him, and he was now on the road to prosperity.

So it was possible for Joe to go to boarding school after all, and, to his delight, Tom Davis prevailed upon his parents to send him. So Joe and Tom went off together to attend Excelsior Hall, just outside of Cedarhurst, and about a hundred miles from Riverside.

Joe and Tom who had each finished short

courses in the Riverside High School, started for Excelsior Hall at the opening of the Fall term, and had spent the Winter, with the exception of the Christmas holidays, at the institution. They liked it very much, and made a number of friends as well as some enemies. Their chief foe, as well as that of nearly every other lad in Excelsior Hall, was Hiram Shell.

The months passed, and with the waning of Winter, Joe began to feel the call of the baseball diamond. He and Tom got out some old gloves and balls and bats, and in the seclusion of their room they played over again, in imagination, some of the stirring games of the Silver Stars. As yet, however, there had been no baseball activity at Excelsior, and Joe was wondering what sort of team there would be, for that there must be one was a foregone conclusion. Joe knew that before he picked out Excelsior Hall as his particular boarding school.

I might add that Dr. Wright Fillmore was the principal of Excelsior Hall. He was dubbed "Cæsar" because of his fondness for the character of that warrior, and because he was always holding him up as a pattern of some virtues to his pupils. Dr. Enos Rudden the mathematical teacher was one of the best-liked of all the in-

structors. He was fond of athletics, and acted as sort of head coach and trainer for the football and baseball teams.

As much as Dr. Rudden was liked so was Professor Rodd disliked. Professor Rodd, who was privately termed "Sixteen and a Half" or "Sixteen" for short (because of the number of feet in a rod) was very exacting, fussy and a terror to the lads who failed to know their Latin lessons.

And as we are at present immediately concerned with Professor Rodd, now I will go back to where we left him approaching the group of students, with wrath plainly written on his countenance.

"Who—who threw that ball—that snowball?" the irate instructor cried. "I demand to know. Look at my hat! Look at it, I say!" and that there might be no difficulty in the boys seeing it Mr. Rodd endeavored to take off his head-piece.

But he found this no easy matter, for the snowballs, hitting it with considerable force, had driven it down over his brow. He struggled to get it off and this only made him the more angry.

"Who—who threw those balls at me?" again demanded Professor Rodd, and this time he managed to work off his hat. He held it out accusingly.

"We—I—er—that is—we all were having a throwing contest," explained Teeter Nelson, diffidently, "and—er——"

"You certainly *all* didn't throw at me," interrupted the professor. "Only two balls struck me, and I demand to know who threw them. Or shall I report you all to Dr. Fillmore and have him keep you in bounds for a week; eh?"

"Nobody meant to hit you, Professor," put in Tom. "You see——"

"Will you or will you not answer my question?" snapped the instructor, in the same tone of voice he used in the classroom, when some luckless lad was stuttering and stammering over the difference between the *gerund* and the *gerundive*. "Who threw the balls?"

"I—I'm afraid I did," faltered Joe. "I threw one, and—and——"

"I threw the other," popped out Peaches. "But it was an accident, Professor."

"An accident! Humph!"

"Yes," eagerly went on Peaches, who, having been longer at the school than Joe, knew better how to handle the irate instructor. "You see it was this way: We were having a contest, and wanted to see who could throw over the trees. Instead of throwing *primus*, *secundus*, and *tertius*

as we might have done, Joe and I threw together—um—er—ah *conjunctim* so to speak,” and Peaches managed to keep a straight face even while struggling to find the right Latin word. “Yes, we threw *conjunctim*—together—and we both wanted to see who could do the best—er—*supero*—you know, and—er we—well, it was an accident—*casus eventus*. We are awfully sorry, and——”

Professor Rodd gave an audible sniff, but there was a marked softening of the hard lines about his face. He was an enthusiastic Latin scholar, and the trial of his life was to know that most of his pupils hated the study—indeed as many boys do. So when the teacher found one who took the trouble in ordinary conversation to use a few Latin words, or phrases, the professor was correspondingly pleased. Peaches knew this.

“It was a *casus eventus*—an accident,” the fair-cheeked lad repeated, very proud of his ability in the dead language.

“We are very sorry,” put in Joe, “and I’ll pay for having your hat ironed.”

“We threw in *conjunctim*,” murmured Peaches.

“Ha! A very good attempt at the Latin—at least some of the words are,” admitted Professor Rodd. “They do credit to your studying, Lant-

feld, but how in the world did you ever get *casus eventus* into accident? ”

“Why—er—it’s so in the dictionary, Professor,” pleaded Peaches.

“Yes, but look up the substantive, and remember your endings. Here I’ll show you,” and, pulling from his pocket a Latin dictionary, which he was never without, Professor Rodd, sticking his battered hat back on his head, began to quote and translate and do all manner of things with the dead language, to show Peaches where he had made his errors. And Peaches, sacrificing himself on the altar of friendship, stood there like a man, nodding his head and agreeing with everything the instructor said, whether he understood it or not.

“Your *conjunctim* was not so bad,” complimented the professor, “but I could never pass *casus eventus*. However, I am glad to see that you take an interest in your studies. I wish more of the boys did. Now take the irregular conjugation for instance. We will begin with the indicative mood and——”

The professor’s voice was droning off into his classroom tones. Peaches held his ground valiantly.

“Come on, fellows, cut for it!” whispered Tee-

ter hoarsely. "Leg it, Joe. Peaches will take care of him."

"But the hat—I damaged it—I want to pay for it," objected our hero, who was square in everything.

"Don't worry about that. When Old Sixteen gets to spouting Latin or Greek he doesn't know whether he's on his head or his feet, and as for a hat—say, forget it and come on. He'll never mention it again. Peaches knows how to handle him. Peaches is the best Latin lad in the whole school, and once Sixteen finds some one who will listen to his new theory about conjugating irregular verbs, he'll talk until midnight. Come on!"

"Poor Peaches!" murmured Tom Davis.

"Never mind, Sister," spoke George Bland, as he linked his arm in that of Joe, "Peaches seen his duty and he done it nobly, as the novels say. When Sixteen gets through with him we'll blow him to a feed to make it up to him. Come on while the going's good. He'll never see us."

Thus the day—rather an eventful one as it was destined to become—came to an end. The boys filed into the big dining hall, and talk, which had begun to verge around to baseball, could scarcely be heard for the clatter of knives and forks and dishes.

Some time later there came a cautious knock on the door of the room that Tom Davis and Joe Matson shared. The two lads were deep in their books.

"Who's there?" asked Joe sharply.

"It's me—Peaches," was the quick if ungrammatical answer. "The coast is clear—open your oak," and he rattled the knob of the door.

Tom unlocked and swung wide the portal, and the hero of the Latin engagement entered.

"Quick—anything to drink?" he demanded. "I'm a rag! Say, I never swallowed so much dry Latin in my life. My throat is parched. Don't tell me that all that ginger ale you smuggled in the other day is gone—don't you dare do it!"

"Tom, see if there's a bottle left for the gentleman of thirst," directed Joe with a smile.

Tom went to the window and pulled up a cord that was fastened to the sill. On the end of the string was a basket, and in it three bottles of ginger ale.

"Our patent refrigerator," explained Joe, with a wave of his hand. "Do the uncorking act, Tom, and we'll get busy. You can go to sleep,"—this last to a book he had been studying, as he tossed it on a couch.

"Oh, but that's good!" murmured Peaches as

he drained his glass. "Now I can talk. I came in, Joe and Tom, to see if you didn't think it would be a good thing to have a fight."

"A fight! For cats' sake, who with?" demanded Tom.

"Are you spoiling for one?" asked Joe.

"Oh, I mean a snowball fight. This is probably the last of the season, and I was thinking we could get a lot of fellows together, make a fort, and have a regular battle like we read about in Cæsar to-day. It would be no end of sport."

"I think so myself," agreed Joe.

"Bully!" exclaimed Tom sententiously, burying his nose in his ginger ale glass. "Go on, tell us some more."

"Well, I was thinking," resumed Peaches, "that we——"

He was interrupted by another tap on the door. In an instant Peaches had dived under the table. With one sweep of his arm Joe noiselessly collected the bottles, while Joe spread a paper over the glasses. The knock was repeated, and the two lads looked apprehensively at the door.

CHAPTER III

AN ANGRY BULLY

"WELL, why don't one of you fellows open the door?" demanded Peaches in a hoarse whisper from his point of vantage under the table. "If it's one of the 'profs,' or a monitor, he'll get wise if you wait all this while."

It might be explained that there was a rule at Excelsior Hall against students visiting in their classmates' rooms at certain hours of the day, unless permission had been secured from the professor or monitor in charge of the dormitory. Needless to say Peaches had not secured any such permission—the lads seldom did.

"Aren't you going to open it?" again demanded Peaches, from where he had taken refuge, so as to be out of sight, should the caller prove to be some one in authority.

"Yes—certainly—of course," replied Joe. "Tom, you open the door."

Once more came the knock.

"Open it yourself," insisted Tom. "It's as much your room as it is mine. Go ahead."

But there was no need for any one to first encounter the stern gaze of some professor, if such the unannounced caller should prove to be. The knock was repeated and then a voice demanded:

"Say, you fellows needn't pretend not to be in there. I can hear you whispering. What's up?" and with that the portal swung open and Teeter Nelson entered. He advanced to the middle of the room and stood moving up and down on his tiptoes.

"I like your nerve!" he went on. "Having a spread and not tipping a fellow off. Is it all gone?" and with a sweep of his arm he sent the paper cover flying from over the half-emptied ginger ale glasses. "Where's Peaches?" he demanded. "I know he's out, for I was at his den, and there's not a soul in. He's got a 'dummy' in the bed, but it's rank. Wouldn't fool anybody."

"Then you must have spoiled it!" exclaimed Peaches, sticking his head out from beneath the table, the cloth draping itself around his neck like a lady's scarf. "I made a dandy figure. It would fool even Sixteen himself; and then I sneaked out. I made it look as natural as could be. I'll bet you did something to it."

"Only punched it a couple of times to see if it was you," retorted Teeter. "But say, what's

going on? Why didn't you open when I knocked?"

"Thought it was a prof," replied Joe. "Why didn't you give the code knock. Tat—rat-a-tat-tat—tat-tat—and the hiss."

"That's right, I did forget it. But I got all excited when I found that Peaches had sneaked off without telling me. Say, what's on, anyhow? Where's the feed? Give me something good."

"Nothing going but ginger ale," answered Joe, as Peaches crawled the rest of the way out from under the table. "And I don't know as there's any left."

"Gee, you fellows have nerve!" complained the newcomer.

"There's one bottle," said Tom, who had charge of the improvised refrigerator, and forthwith he hauled up the basket, at the sight of which Teeter laughed joyously, and proceeded to get outside of his share of the refreshments.

"What's doing?" he demanded, after his thirst was quenched, and when they were all seated at the table.

"We're going to have a snow battle," explained Peaches. "We were just talking about it when you gave us heart disease by pounding on the oak."

"Heart disease; my eye!" exclaimed Teeter. "You should have a clear conscience such as I have, and nothing would worry you. That's good ale all right, Joe. Got any more?" and he finished his glass.

"Nary a drop. But go on, Peaches. Tell us more about the snow fight."

Whereupon the lad did, waxing enthusiastic, and causing his chums to get into the same state of mind.

"It will be no end of fun!" declared Teeter. "We'll choose sides and see which one can capture the fort."

"When can we do it?" asked Tom.

"The sooner the quicker," was Joe's opinion. "The snow won't last long."

"Then we ought to start on the fort to-morrow and have the battle the next day," was the opinion of Peaches.

Permission to have the snow battle was obtained from Dr. Fillmore the next day, and the work of building the snow fort started soon after lessons were over. Fortunately the white flakes packed well, and with a foundation of a number of big snowballs the fort was shortly in process of construction.

A better day for a snow battle could not have been desired. It was just warm enough so that the snow stuck, and yet cool enough so that the exertion would not be unpleasant. The fort was at the far end of the big school campus, and all about it the ground had been practically cleared of snow to build it. This made it necessary for the attacking party to carry their ammunition from afar. As for the defenders of the fort, they had plenty of snow inside, and, as a last resort they could use part of the walls of the structure itself to repel the enemy.

The lads had made wooden shields for themselves, some using the heads of barrels, with leather loops for hand and arm. Others were content with something simpler, a mere board, or a barrel stave.

Sides had been chosen, and, somewhat to his own surprise, Joe Matson was made captain of the attacking force.

"We want you because you can throw straight and hard," explained Teeter, who was a sort of lieutenant of the attacking army.

"Soak those fellows good!" pleaded Peaches.

"We've got to look out for icy balls," cautioned Tom.

"How so?" asked Joe, as he looked toward the

fort where Frank Brown, as captain, was marshalling his lads.

"I heard that Hiram Shell and Luke Fodick soaked a lot of snowballs in water last night, and let 'em freeze," went on Tom. "They're just mean enough to use them."

"That's right," agreed Peaches, "and we made it up not to throw that kind. Well, if we catch Hiram or Luke using 'em we'll make a protest, that's all."

"Say, are you fellows all ready?" asked Frank Brown at length, as he looked to see if he and his mates had a good supply of ammunition.

"Sure," answered Joe. "Yell when you want us to come at you."

"Any time now," replied Frank. "Get on the job, fellows!" he called to his force.

The snow battle began. Joe and his lads had boxes and baskets of snowballs piled where they could easily get them. They took them with them, up to the very walls of the fort, certain boys being designated as ammunition carriers.

The fight was fast and furious. The air was thick with flying balls; and the yells, shouts, cries, and laughter of the lads could be heard afar.

Up to the fort swarmed Joe and his mates, only to be driven back by a withering fire. Then they

came once more to the attack, pouring in a destructive rain of white balls on the defenders of the snow fort. But this resulted partly in disaster for the attacking foe, as several of their number were captured.

"At 'em again!" ordered Joe, after a slight repulse. "We can capture that place!"

Once more they swarmed to the attack, and with very good effect, delivering such a rattling volley of balls, that the defenders were thrown into confusion, and could not send back an answering fire quickly enough.

"Swarm the walls! Swarm the walls!" yelled Joe.

He and his lads scrambled up, their pockets filled with balls. Down upon the hapless foe they threw them, and in another moment the fort would have been theirs.

"Repel boarders! Repel boarders!" sang out Hiram. "Come on, fellows, give 'em an extra dose!"

Joe saw the bully, and Luke, his crony, rush to a corner of the fort and take something from a wooden box. The next instant several lads uttered cries of real pain, as they felt the missiles of almost solid ice hit them. Joe understood at once.

"The mean, sneaking coward!" he cried. In his hand he held a large snowball. It was hard packed, but did not equal the ice balls in any particular. Yet it was effective.

Joe saw the chance he wanted. Hiram had drawn back his hand to throw one of the missiles he and Luke had secretly made, when, with a suddenness that was startling, Joe threw his large snowball full in the bully's face.

Hiram caught his breath. The ball he had intended throwing fell from his hand. He staggered back, his face a mass of snow. Then he recovered himself, cleared his eyes of the flakes and, with a yell of rage sprang forward.

"I saw you throw that, Joe Matson!" he cried. "You had no right to pitch it with all your might at such close range."

"I had as much right as you and Luke have to use iceballs," retorted our hero.

"I—I'll fix you for that!" threatened Hiram, boiling over with wrath, as he scrambled up the inner walls of the fort and stood before Joe. "I'll knock you into the middle of next week! I'll teach you how to behave. I'm going to lick you good," and he drew back his fist, and aimed a mighty blow at our hero.

CHAPTER IV

JOE LEARNS SOMETHING

JOE MATSON had been in fights before. Some had been forced upon him, and he accepted the challenges for sufficient reasons, and had given a good account of himself in the battles. Other fistic encounters had been of his own seeking and for excellent reasons he had generally come out ahead.

The prospective fight with the bully was very sudden. Joe had seen what he considered a mean trick on Hiram's part and had thrown on the impulse of the moment. He rather regretted his hasty action, but it was too late for regrets now, and he was willing to accept the outcome.

"I'm going to make you wish you'd never come to Excelsior Hall!" cried Hiram, and with that he expected the blow which he had aimed at Joe to land on the countenance of our hero.

But, like the celebrated flea of history, who, as the Dutchman said, "ven you put your finger on him, dot flea he aind't dere!" so it was with

Joe. He cleverly ducked, and then waited for what would happen next.

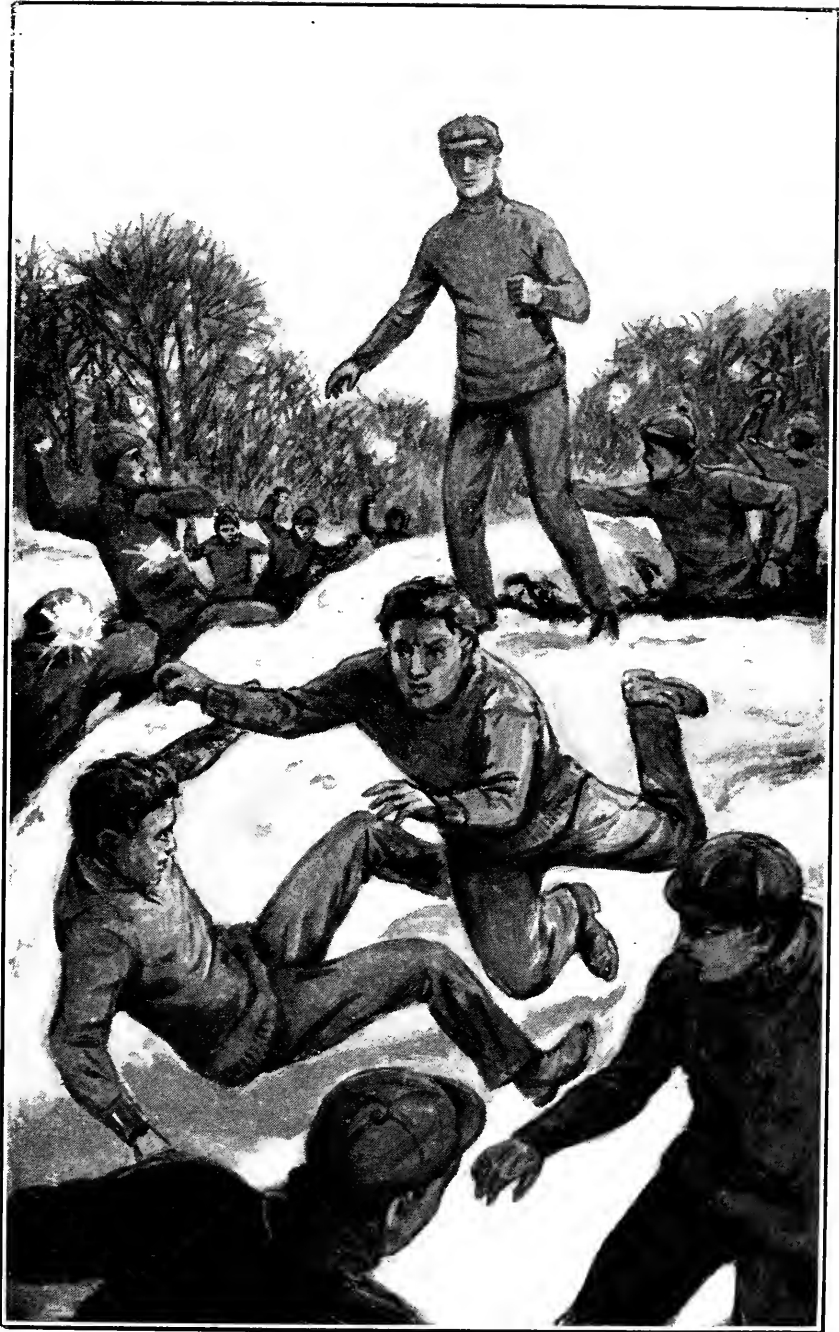
Something did happen with a vengeance. Hiram had rushed up the slippery, sloping, inner wall of the fort to get at Joe, and pummel him for sending the snowball smashing into his face, but when Joe turned aside, and Hiram's fist went through the air like a batter fanning over a swift ball, the bully was unable to recover himself.

He overbalanced, clawed vainly at the atmosphere, made a grab for Joe, who took good care to keep well out of reach, and then Hiram Shell went slipping and sliding down the outside wall of the snow fort, turning over several times ere he landed at the bottom, amid a pile of the white flakes.

In his descent he struck several lads who were swarming up to the attack, and these Hiram bowled over like tenpins, so that when he came to rest he was in the centre of a pile of heaving bodies, and of threshing and swaying arms and legs, like a football player downed after a long run.

"Get off me, you fellows!" yelled Hiram, when he could get his breath. "I'll punch some of you good and hard for this!"

"And you'll get punched yourself if you don't



HIRAM SHELL WENT SLIPPING AND SLIDING DOWN THE
OUTSIDE WALL OF THE SNOW FORT.

take your feet out of my face!" retorted Peaches, who was one of the few pupils not afraid of the bully.

"Where's that Joe Matson? I've got a score to settle with him," went on Hiram, as he struggled to his feet, and disentangled himself from the mass of snow-warriors.

"You'll have one to settle with me if you knock me down again!" cried Teeter Nelson, as he tried to shake some snow out from inside his collar. It was melting and running down his back in little cold streams. "What do you mean by playing that way?" demanded Teeter, who had not seen the impending fight between Joe and Hiram. "Why don't you stay inside your own fort, and not make a human battering ram of yourself?"

"You mind your own business!" snapped Hiram with an ugly look. "I slipped and fell, or else Joe Matson pushed me. Wait until I get hold of him."

With a look of anger on his face, Hiram turned and went swarming up the outer wall of the fort. At the top stood Joe, waiting, and the lad's face showed no signs of fear, though he was a trifle pale. Though Hiram was larger, and evidently stronger than Joe, our hero was not

afraid. He was debating in his mind whether it would not be better to rush to the ground below, where he would have a better chance if it came to an out-and-out-fight. Yet Joe had a certain advantage on top of the snow wall, for he could easily push Hiram down. Yet this was not his idea of a contest of that kind.

"I'll fix you, Matson!" muttered the bully. "I'll teach you to push me down! You might have broken my arm or leg," he added in an injured tone.

"I didn't push you!" retorted our hero. "You tried to hit me and missed. Then you fell."

"That's right!" chimed in Peaches, amid a silence, for the general snowball fight had ceased in anticipation of another kind of an encounter.

Hiram balanced himself half way up the white wall.

"What did you smash me in the face with a snowball for?" he demanded. "We made it up that no one was to aim at another fellow's face at close range, and you know it."

"Of course I know it," answered Joe. "But that rule applied to hard balls, and I didn't use one. I threw a soft ball at you, and you know why I did it, too. I'll let Luke Fodick have one, too, if he does it again."

"Does what again?" sneered the bully's crony.

"Use icy balls. I saw you and Hiram take some frozen ones from that box," and Joe pointed to the secret supply of ammunition. "Some of our fellows were hit and that's why I threw in your face, Hiram. Now, if you want to fight I'm ready for you," and Joe stood well balanced on top of the wall, awaiting the approach of his enemy.

Somehow the fighting spirit was oozing out of Hiram. He felt sure that he could whip Joe in a battle on level ground, but when his opponent stood above him, and when it was evident that Joe could deliver a blow before Hiram could, with the probability that it would send the attacker sliding down the wall again, the bully began to see that discretion was the better part of valor.

"Do you want to fight?" demanded Hiram, in that tone which sometimes means that the questioner would be glad to get a negative answer.

"I'm not aching for it," replied Joe slowly. "But I'm not going to run away. If you like I'll come down, but you can come up if you want to," and he smiled at Hiram. "You only got what you deserved, you know."

"That's right," chimed in Teeter. "You hadn't any right to use frozen balls, Hiram."

"Sure not!" came in a menacing chorus from Joe's crowd of lads.

"Well, they weren't frozen very hard," mumbled Hiram. "I only threw a few, anyhow, and you've got more fellows than we have."

"Because we captured some of yours—yes," admitted Joe.

"Well, all right then," answered the bully with no good grace. "But if you throw at my face again, at such close range, Joe Matson, I'll give you the best licking you ever had."

"Two can play at that game," was Joe's retort. "I'm ready any time you are."

"Why don't you go at him now, and clean him up?" asked Luke Fodick, making his way to where Hiram stood. "If you don't he'll be saying he backed you to a standstill. Go at him, Hiram."

"I've a good notion to," muttered the bully.

He measured with his eye the distance between himself and Joe, and wondered if he could cover it in a rush, carry his opponent off his feet, and batter and pummel him as they rolled down the fort wall together.

"Go on!" urged Luke.

"I—I guess I will!" spoke Hiram desperately.

Then from the outer fringe of the attacking crowd there arose a cautious warning.

"Cheese it! Here comes old Sixteen!"

Professor Rodd was approaching and the lads well knew that he was bitterly opposed to fights, and would at once report any who engaged in them.

"Come on! Let's finish the snow fight!" cried Teeter. "Get back in your fort, Hiram, and the rest of you, and we'll soon capture it."

"All right," said the bully in a low voice. Then looking at Joe he said: "This isn't the end of it; not by a long shot, Matson. I'll get square with you yet."

"Just as you choose," answered Joe, as he rallied his lads to the attack again.

Then the snow ball fight went on, with Professor Rodd an interested onlooker. Joe's boys finally won, capturing the fort; but the real zest had been taken out of the battle by the unpleasant incident, and the boys no longer fought with jolly good-will.

"Ah, that is what I like to see," remarked the Latin professor, as the lads, having finished the game, strolled away from the fort which had

been sadly battered and disrupted by the attack on it. "Nothing like good, healthy out-door exercise to fit the mind for the classics. I'm sure you will all do better in Latin and Greek for this little diversion."

"He's got another think coming as far as I'm concerned," whispered Teeter to Joe. "I haven't got a line of my Cæsar."

"This is certainly what I like to see," went on the instructor. "No hard feelings, yet I venture to say you all fought well, and hard. It is most delightful."

"It wouldn't have been quite so delightful if you'd have come along a few minutes later and seen a real fight," murmured Peaches. "Would you have stood up to Hiram, Joe?"

"I sure would. I was ready for him, though I don't want to be unfriendly to any of the fellows here. But I couldn't stand for what he did. Oh, I'd have fought him all right, even at the risk of a whipping, or of beating him, and having him down on me all the while I'm here."

"I guess he's down on you all right as it is," ventured George Bland. "And it's too bad, too."

"Oh, I don't know as I care particularly," spoke Joe.

"I thought I heard you say you wanted to play

ball when the Spring season opened," said George.

"So I do, but what has Hiram Shell got to do with it?"

"Lots, as you'll very soon learn," put in Teeter. "Hiram is the head of the ball club—the manager—I guess you forgot that, and he runs things. If he doesn't want a fellow to play—why, that fellow doesn't play—that's all. That's what George means."

"Yes," assented George. "And Hiram is sure down on you after what you did to him to-day, Joe."

The young pitcher stood still. Many thoughts came to him. He felt a strange sinking sensation, as if he had suddenly lost hope. He dwelt for a moment on his great ambition, to be the star pitcher on the school nine, as he had been on the nine at home.

"Well, I guess it's too late to worry about it now," remarked Joe after a bit. "I'm sorry—no; I'm not either!" he cried, with sudden energy. "I'd do the same thing over again if I had to, and if Hiram Shell wants to keep me off the nine he can do it!"

"That's the way to talk!" cried Teeter, clapping Joe on the back.

CHAPTER V

THE TABLES TURNED

"WELL, Joe, what do you think about it?" Tom Davis glanced at his chum across the room as he asked this question. It was several hours after the snow battle, and the two lads were studying, or making a pretense at it.

"Think about what, Tom?"

"Oh, you know what I mean—what happened to-day, and how it's going to affect your chances for the nine. They look rather slim, don't they?"

"Well, Tom, I don't mind admitting that they do. I didn't know Hiram was such a high-mucky-muck in baseball here. But there's no use crying over spilled milk. He and I would have had a clash sooner or later, anyhow, and it might as well be first as last."

"It's too blamed bad though," went on Tom.

"Yes," agreed Joe, "especially as I picked out Excelsior Hall because their nine had so many victories to its credit, and because it had a good

reputation. That's what partly induced you to come here, too, I guess."

"Well, yes, in a way. Of course I like baseball, but I'm not so crazy after it as you are. Maybe that's why I'm not such a good player. If I can hold down first, or play out in the field, it suits me; but you——"

"I want to be pitcher or nothing," interrupted Joe with a smile, "but I'm afraid I'm a long way from the box now."

"Yes, from what I can hear, Hiram has the inside track in the baseball game. He's manager chiefly because he puts up a lot of money for the team, and because his friends, what few he has, are officers in the organization."

"Who's captain?" asked Joe. "Maybe I could induce him to let me play even if Hiram is down on me."

"Nothing doing there," replied Tom quickly. "Luke Fodick is captain, or, rather he was last year, I hear, and he's slated for the same position this season. Luke and Hiram are as thick as such fellows always are. When Hiram is hit Luke does the boo-hoo act for him. No, Luke will be down on you as much as his crony is. But maybe we can get up a second nine, and play some games on our own hook!"

"None of that!" Joe exclaimed quickly. "I'm not an insurgent. I play with the regulars or not at all. They'd be saying all sorts of things against me if you and I tried to start an opposition team."

"That's so. Still it mightn't be a bad idea, under the circumstances, to have another team, if it wasn't for what the school would say."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, Excelsior got dumped in the interscholastic league last season. They play for the blue banner you know—a sort of prize trophy—and it was won by Morningside Academy, which now holds it. That's why I say it might be a good thing to have some more ginger in the team here. I know you could put it in, after the way you pitched on the Silver Stars when they licked the Resolutes."

"Well, it can't be done I'm afraid," Joe rejoined. "There can only be one first team in a school, and I don't want to disrupt things or play second fiddle. If I can't get on the nine I'll have to stay off, that's all. But it's going to be mighty tough to sit still and watch the other fellows play, and all the while just itching to get hold of the ball—mighty tough," and Joe gazed abstractedly about the room.

"I wish I could help you, old man, but I can't," said Tom. "I suppose this clash with Hiram had to come but I do wish it had held off until after the season opened. Once you were on the nine you could show the fellows what stuff you had in your pitching arm, and then Hiram and Luke could do their worst, but they couldn't get you off the team."

"That's nice of you to say, but I don't know about it," remarked Joe. "Well, I'm about done studying. I wish——"

But he did not finish the sentence, for there came a knock on the door—a pre-arranged signal in a certain code of raps, showing that one of their classmates stood without.

"Wait a minute," called Tom, as he went to open the door.

His quick view through the crack showed the smiling faces of Teeter and Peaches, and there was an audible sigh of relief from Joe's roommate. For Tom had fallen behind in his studies of late, and had been warned that any infractions of the rules might mean his suspension for a week or two.

"Gee, you took long enough to open the door," complained Teeter, "especially considering what we have with us."

"Don't you mean 'whom' you have with you?" asked Joe, nodding toward Peaches.

"No, I mean 'what'," insisted Teeter with a grin as he unbuttoned his coat and brought into view several pies, and a couple of packages done up in paper.

"Oh, that's the game, is it?" asked Joe with a laugh.

"And there's more to it," added Peaches, as he produced two bottles from the legs of his trousers. "This is the best strawberry pop that can be bought. We'll have a feast as is a feast; eh, fellows?"

"Lock the door!" exclaimed Tom, and he did it himself, being nearest to it. "There may be confiscating spirits abroad in the land to-night."

"Old Sixteen is abroad, anyhow," spoke Teeter with a laugh, "but I guess we'll be safe. I have a scheme, if worst comes to worst."

"What is it?" asked Joe.

"You'll see when the time comes—if it does. 'Now, on with the dance—let joy be unconfined!' Open the pop, Peaches, and don't sample it until we're all ready. Got any glasses, you fellows? This is a return game for the treat you gave us the other night."

"Then we'll find the glasses all right," spoke

Joe with a laugh. "But what's your game, not to let old Sixteen catch us at this forbidden midnight feast? Have you dummies in your beds?"

"Not a dum. But watch my smoke."

From the parcels he carried, Teeter produced what looked to be books—books, as attested by the words on their covers—books dealing with Latin, and the science of physics,

"There are our plates," he said as he laid the books down on the table. Then Joe and Tom saw that the books were merely covers pasted over a sort of box into which a whole pie could easily be put. "Catch the idea," went on Teeter. "We are eating in here, which is against the rules, worse luck. But, perchance, some monitor or professor knocks unexpectedly. Do we have to hustle and scramble to conceal our refreshments? Answer—we do not. What do we do?"

"Answer," broke in Peaches. "We merely slip our pie or sandwiches or whatever it happens to be, inside our 'books,' and go right on studying. Catch on?"

"I should say we did!" exclaimed Joe. "That's great!"

"But what about the bottles of strawberry pop?" asked Tom. "We can't hide them in the fake books."

"No, I've another scheme for that," went on Teeter. "Show 'em, Peaches."

Thereupon Peaches proceeded to extract the corks from the bottles of liquid refreshment. From the packages Teeter had brought he took some other corks. They had glass tubes through them, two tubes for each cork. And on one tube in each cork was a small rubber hose.

"There!" exclaimed Teeter as Peaches put the odd corks in the bottles. "We can pour out the pop with neatness and dispatch into our glasses and at the same time, should any one unexpectedly enter, why—we are only conducting an experiment in generating oxygen or hydrogen gas. The bottles are the retorts, and we can pretend our glasses are to receive the gas. How's that?"

"All to the horse radish!" cried Joe in delight.

"Then proceed," ordered Teeter with a laugh; and when all was in readiness each lad sat with a fake book near him, into which he could slip his piece of pie at a moment's warning, while on the table stood the bottles of pop with the tubes and hose extending from their corks—truly a most scientific-looking array of flasks and glassware.

"Now let's talk," suggested Teeter, biting gen-

erously into a pie. "That was a great fight we had to-day, all right."

"And there might have been one of a different kind," added Peaches. "Hear anything more from Hiram, Joe?"

"No, I don't expect to—until the next time, and then I suppose we'll have it out."

"I guess Joe's goose is cooked as far as getting on the nine is concerned," ventured Tom.

"Sure thing," agreed Peaches.

"Yet we're going to need a new pitcher," went on Teeter. "Probably two of 'em?"

"How's that?" asked Tom interestedly.

"Why Rutherford, our star man of last year, graduated, and he's gone to Princeton or Yale. Madison, the substitute who was pretty good in a pinch game, graduated, too; but we thought he was coming back for an extra course in Latin. I heard to-day that he isn't, and so that means we'll have to have two new box-men. There might be a show for Joe."

"Forget it!" advised Peaches. "Not the way Hiram and Luke feel. They went off by themselves right after supper to-night, and I heard them saying something about Joe here, but I couldn't catch what it was. Oh, they're down on him all right, for Joe backed Hiram to a stand-

still to-day, and that hasn't happened to the bully in a blue moon."

"Oh, well, I guess I can live if I don't get on the nine my first season here," spoke Joe. "I'll keep on trying though."

Thus the talk went on, chiefly about baseball, and gradually the strawberry pop was lowered in the bottles, and the pie was nearly consumed.

"Guess you had all your trouble for nothing, Teeter," remarked Tom. "We aren't going to be interrupted to-night."

Hardly had he spoken than there was the faint rattle of the door knob. It was as if some one had tried it to see if the portal was unlocked before knocking. Slight as the noise was, the lads heard it.

"Quick! On the job!" whispered Teeter. He crammed the rest of his pie into the fake book, as did the others.

"Study like blazes!" was Teeter's next order.

There came a knock at the door.

"Young gentlemen have you any visitors?" demanded the omnious voice of Professor Rodd.

Teeter placed the ends of the rubber tubes one in each of two glasses before Joe could answer.

"I heard voices in there—more than two voices," went on the Latin instructor grimly, "and

"I demand that you open the door before I send for Dr. Fillmore and the janitor."

Tom slid to the portal and unlocked it. Professor Rodd stepped into the room and his stern gaze took in the two visitors. But he also saw something else that surprised him.

On the table was apparatus that very much resembled some used for experiments in the physics class. And, wonder of wonders, each of the four lads held a book in his hand—a book that the merest glance showed to be either a Latin grammar or a treatise on chemistry.

"What—why——?" faltered the professor.

"*Aliqui—aliquare aliqua*," recited Teeter in a sing-song declension voice. "*Aliquorum—aliquarum—aliquorum*." Then he pretended to look up suddenly, as if just aware of the presence of the instructor.

"Oh, good evening, Professor Rodd," said Teeter calmly.

"What does this mean?" exclaimed the teacher. "Don't you know it is against the rules for students to visit in each others' rooms after hours without permission?"

"I knew it was—that is for anything but study," replied Teeter frankly. "I didn't think you

minded if we helped each other with our Latin." Oh! what an innocent look was on his face!

"Oh!—er—um—and you are studying Latin?" asked the professor, while a pleased smile replaced his frown.

"Yes, Professor," put in Peaches. "And I can't seem to remember, nor find, what the neuter plural accusative of 'some' is. I have gone as far as *aliquos—aliquas*, but——"

"*Aliqua—aliqua!*" exclaimed the Professor quickly. "You ought not to forget that. We had it in class the other day."

"Oh, yes, so we did!" exclaimed Teeter. "I just remember now; don't you, Joe?"

"Yes," murmured Joe, wondering whether or not they had turned the tables on the teacher.

"I am glad to see you so studious," went on Mr. Rodd. "And I see you do not neglect your physics, either. Ah—er—what is the red liquid in the bottles," and he looked at what remained of the strawberry pop.

It was the question Tom and Joe had feared would be asked. But Teeter was equal to the emergency.

"Professor," he asked innocently, "isn't there some rule regarding *quis* used in the indefinite in connection with *aliquis*?"

"Yes, and I am glad you spoke of that," said Mr. Rodd quickly, rubbing his hands, much pleased that he had a chance to impart some Latin information. "*Quis* indefinite is found in the following compounds: *aliquis*—someone; *si quis*, if any; *ne quis*, lest any; *ecquis*, *num quis*, whether any. I am very glad you brought that up. I will speak of it in class to-morrow. But I must go now."

The boys began to breathe easier and Teeter, who had been whispering declensions to himself, left off.

"Oh, by the way," spoke the Professor, as if he had just thought of it: "I don't mind you boys studying together, if you don't stay up too late. But it is better to ask permission. However, I will speak to Dr. Fillmore about it, and it will be all right from now on. I am pleased that some of my students are so painstaking. I wish more were."

With a bow he left them and they tried not to give way to their exultation until he was far down the corridor.

"Say, talk about pulling off a stunt! We did it all right!" exclaimed Joe.

"I should say yes," agreed the others.

CHAPTER VI

THE BULLY SNEERS

"WELL, you ought to get out a patent on this," remarked Joe, when they resumed the eating of the pie and the drinking of the pop, following the withdrawal of the professor.

"You sure had," agreed Tom. "Let Joe give you some points. His father has taken out several patents."

"Oh, I guess we'll make it free for all—any fellow is welcome to the idea," replied Teeter. "So your dad's an inventor, eh, Matson?"

"Yes, harvester machinery—his latest was a corn reaper and binder, and he nearly lost it," and Joe briefly told how Iasac Benjamin and Rufus Holdney had nearly ruined his father, as related in detail in "Baseball Joe of the Silver Stars."

"Ever hear anything more of those fellows?" asked Tom, following the recital of the schemes of the plotters.

"No, they seem to have disappeared," answered Joe. "They cleared out after dad won his case in the courts. But he's on the watch for

them, he told me. His business isn't all settled yet, and there is some danger. But I guess Benjamin or Holdney won't bother him, though some other rascals may."

"Anything more to eat?" asked Peaches, during the pause that followed.

"Say, what are you, a human refrigerator?" demanded Teeter. "I couldn't carry any more pie if I tried."

"It'll be our treat next time," observed Joe. "Why didn't George Bland come with you?"

"Had to bone on trigonometry, I guess," replied Peaches.

"Does he play on the team?" Joe wanted to know.

"Yes, we all do. George is short, I'm on third, and Teeter holds down first sometimes. But you never can tell what Hiram is going to do. He and Luke are always making shifts, and that's what lost us the Blue Banner last season. The fellows would no more than get familiar with their positions than Hiram would shift 'em. Oh, he runs things to suit himself."

The hour of ten boomed out from the big school clock and the visitors left.

"Spring fever!" exclaimed Joe one day, as he and Tom came from a physics lecture.

"Yes, I've got it, too," admitted Tom. "It's in the air, and I'm glad of it. What's that Shakespeare says about 'now is the winter of our discontent?'" "

"Oh, cheese it! Don't begin spouting poetry. Besides I'm not sure it was Shakespeare, and I don't give a hang. All I know is that Spring is coming, and soon they'll begin getting the diamond in shape."

"Precious lot of good that will do you—or me, either. Hiram is as down on me as he is on you."

"I know it, and I was going to speak of that, Tom. There's no use in your losing a chance to play on the nine just because I'm on the outs. Why don't you cut loose from me? You can get another room, and maybe if you do——"

"Hold on!" cried Tom quickly. "Do you want me to go, old man?" and he looked sharply at Joe.

"Nonsense! Of course you know I don't."

"Then drop that kind of talk, unless you want a fight on your hands. You and I stick together, Hiram Shell or no Hiram Shell—and Luke Fodick."

"Well, I didn't know," spoke Joe softly.

"Here, come on; let's have a catch," proposed Tom. "I've got an old ball that we used in one

of the Star games. Get over there and sting some in to me. Wait until I get my glove on," and he adjusted his mitt.

"Jove! This is like old times!" exclaimed Joe, as he lovingly fingered the horsehide—dirty and stained as it was from many a clouting and drive into the tall grass and daisies. "I wish we could go and see a game, even if we couldn't play."

"Same here," came from Tom, as he crouched to receive the ball his chum was about to deliver. Joe wound up and sent in a "hot" one. It landed squarely in Tom's glove for the first-baseman (a position he sometimes had played on the Stars) was not a half bad catcher.

"How was that?" asked Joe.

"Pretty good. Not quite over the plate, but you can get 'em there. Let 'em come about so," and Tom indicated a stone that would serve for home.

"Watch this," requested Joe as he wound up again and let drive.

"A beaut!" cried Tom. "Give me some more that way, and you'll have the man out."

"Say, what are you fellows doing?" demanded a voice, and the two chums looked up to see Hiram Shell gazing at them with mingled expressions on his fleshy face.

"Oh, having a little practice," replied Joe easily. The feeling between himself and the bully had nearly worn off, and they were on speaking, if not on friendly terms.

"Practice for what?" demanded Hiram.

"Well, the baseball season opens pretty soon," went on Joe, "and Tom and I sort of felt the fever in our veins to-day. Want to have a catch?"

"No," half snarled Hiram. "Say, did you fellows play ball before you came here?" he demanded.

"Sure," put in Tom. "Joe was one of the best pitchers on the Silver Stars."

"The Silver Stars? Never heard of 'em!" sneered Hiram.

"Oh, it was only an amateur nine," Joe admitted modestly. "Tom here was first baseman, and we had some good country games."

"Huh! Maybe you came *here* to play baseball!" suggested Hiram with a leer. "Seems to me I heard that you had some such notion."

"Well, I have," asserted Joe confidently. "I like the game, and I'd give a good deal to get on the nine. So would Tom, I guess."

"First base is filled," snapped Hiram.

"How about pitcher," asked Tom eagerly, anx-

ious to put in a good word for his chum. "I hear you need a new pitcher."

"Oh, you did; eh?" exclaimed the bully with an unpleasant laugh. "Well, you've got another 'hear' coming. Besides, if there wasn't another pitcher in the country, you wouldn't get a chance, Matson!"

"No?" queried Joe easily.

"No, and a dozen times no! What, you pitch? Say, you may have been all right on a sand-lots team, but there's some class to Excelsior Hall. We don't want any dubs on our nine. You think you might pitch on *my* team? I guess nixy! We want some fellow who can deliver the goods."

"Joe can!" exclaimed Tom eagerly.

"Aw, forget it!" sneered Hiram. "Why, you'd be knocked out of the box first inning with some of the teams we play. You pitch! Ha! Ha! That's pretty rich. I'll have to tell the fellows about this!"

"I didn't ask you to let me pitch," said Joe quietly though an angry spot burned in either cheek.

"No, and you'd better not!" snapped Hiram. "You pitch! Ha! Ha! It makes me laugh," and with a sneering look at Joe the bully strode off, chuckling unpleasantly.

CHAPTER VII

A CLASH WITH LUKE

FOR several minutes Joe stood staring after the baseball manager. The young pitcher's arm hung listlessly at his side. There was a look on his face that would have been sad, had Joe been that kind of a lad—showing his feelings needlessly. But our hero was full of spunk and grit, and, though Hiram's unnecessarily cruel words hurt him grievously, Joe shut his teeth with a firmer grip, squared his shoulders, drew himself up, and then he smiled at Tom.

"Well, of all the mean, unmitigated, low-down, cantankerous, sneaking, bulldozing and——" spluttered the first baseman.

"Hold on!" exclaimed his companion. "You'll blow up if you go on that way, Tom. Besides, save some of those big words for a time when you may need 'em."

"Need 'em? Say if I don't need 'em now I never will. I wish I had thought to get rid of a few when that bully was here."

"You'd only gotten into trouble. Better keep still about it."

"I can't Joe. Just think of it! We came here to play ball, and the first crack out of the box that fellow goes and tells us we can't."

"Well, I don't know as I have any particular right to play on the nine here."

"Yes, you have, the best right in the world! I'll bet they haven't got a pitcher here who can stand up to you, and I'm going to tell that sneaking bully so, too," and Tom started off after the departing Hiram.

"No, don't!" cried Joe quickly. "It will only make matters worse."

"But you want to pitch; don't you?"

"Sure, but that would be the best way in the world to insure that I wouldn't. Hiram Shell is just the kind of a fellow who, if he thinks a chap wants anything, is going to do his best—or worst—to stop him."

"What are you going to do then?"

"I'm going to lie low and saw wood. The baseball season hasn't opened yet. The team isn't made up. Nobody knows who is going to play and——"

"Well, Hiram as good as told us two fellows

who weren't going to play," interrupted Tom. "That's you and I."

"Wait a bit," advised Joe. "I was going to say that when the season has started and several games have been played there may be a change. I may get a chance to play then, just as I did on the Stars. I'm willing to wait. The Summer is long, and there'll be more than one game. Just say nothing."

"Well, if you say so, I suppose I'll have to," answered his chum, "but it's mighty hard to keep still when a fellow like Hiram Shell rubs your nose in the dirt, and then kicks you in the bargain. He'll have to ask me to play now. I won't volunteer!" and Tom shook his fist in the direction of the manager. "Yes, he'll have to get down on his knees and——"

"Precious little danger of that," remarked Joe with a laugh. He was feeling more like himself now, though the memory of the bully's sneering words rankled. They had cut deep.

"Guess there's no use catching any longer," resumed Tom after a pause. "I don't exactly feel like it."

"Me either. I guess we've gotten over our touch of spring fever," and Joe's voice was a bit despondent. Really, he cared more about what

Hiram had said than he liked to admit, even to himself. He had had high hopes when he left the Riverside High School to come to Excelsior Hall that he would at once become a member of the nine. His ambition, of course, was to pitch, but he would have accepted any position—even out in the field, for the sake of being on the school team. Now it seemed that he was fated not even to be one of the substitutes.

“What are you fellows up to?” asked a voice suddenly, and the two chums turned to behold Peaches and Teeter walking toward them.

“Oh, we were having a catch,” replied Tom, “until we got called down for it. It seems you have to have a permit at Excelsior to indulge in a little private practice,” he added sarcastically.

“What’s up your back now?” asked Teeter.

“Yes, who’s been rubbing your fur the wrong way?” Peaches wanted to know. “What’s riled Sister?”

“Who do you reckon would, if not Bully Shell?” asked Tom. “He’s the limit,” and he rapidly told how Hiram had sneered at Joe’s efforts, and had said that he never would be on the team.

“Well, it’s too bad, for Hiram has the inside track,” admitted Teeter. “I’m as sorry about it

as you are, and so are a lot of the fellows. The trouble is that the athletic committee is too big. There are a lot of lads on it who don't care a rap for baseball or football, who don't even play tennis, yet they have a vote, and it's their votes that keep Hiram as manager, and Luke as captain."

"Can't it be changed?" Tom wanted to know. Joe was maintaining a discrete silence, for he did not want to urge his own qualifications as a pitcher. Tom was eager to fight for his chum.

"Well, it's been tried," spoke Peaches, "but Hiram has his own set with him—a set that isn't the sporting element of Excelsior by a good lot, and their votes keep him in. He spends his money freely and toadies to them, and they fairly black his shoes. Luke Fodick, too, helps out. He has his crowd and they're all with him. I tell you it's rotten, but what are you going to do?"

"I know what I'm going to do if I stay here!" declared Tom.

"What?" demanded Peaches and Teeter eagerly.

"I'm not going to tell until I'm ready to spring it," said Tom, "and when I do I think you'll see some fur fly. How soon before the school team is picked?"

"Well, they ought to get at it pretty soon now," answered Teeter. "There is a meeting of the athletic committee some time next week, and a manager and captain will be elected. It's always done that way here, though in some places they do it right at the close of the season. But it has always been a cut-and-dried affair as long as Hiram has been here. He got in—he and Luke—and they've stayed in ever since."

"Can we go to that athletic meeting?" asked Tom.

"Oh, yes," said Teeter quickly. "It's open to every lad in the school, but lots don't take the trouble to go,—they know how it will turn out."

"Well, maybe there'll be a different turn to it this time," predicted Tom.

"I'm afraid you've got another guess coming," was the retort of Peaches; and then the four friends strolled toward the school buildings.

"What do you say to a scrub game?" asked Teeter.

"I'm willing!" said Joe eagerly; and so it was arranged.

The school diamond was not in very good shape, but two teams, of seven lads on a side, gathered for the first impromptu baseball game of the season the following afternoon. Tom, Joe, Peaches

and Teeter tried to get more out, but there were various excuses, and it might be noted that aside from Teeter and Peaches not one of the former regular nine appeared.

"I guess they're afraid Hiram will release them if they play with us," commented Tom.

"Maybe so," admitted Teeter. "George Bland would come only he had some experimental work to finish. George isn't any more afraid of Hiram than we are."

"Well, let's play ball," suggested Joe; and the game started. Joe occupied the box for his side, an honor that came easily to him since none of the others had had any experience as a twirler of the horsehide.

Our hero felt a little nervous as he took his place, for he knew he was out of practice. Also he felt that he was being watched, not only by his particular friends, but by others. And some of them might not be friendly eyes—nay, some might be spying on behalf of Hiram Shell.

But Joe pulled himself well together, laughed at his idle fears, and sent in a swift curve. It broke cleanly and completely fooled the batter.

"Say, that's the way to get 'em over!" cried Teeter admiringly from behind the bat as the ball landed in his mitt. "Do it some more!"

"I'll try," laughed Joe, and he repeated the trick.

The man was easily struck out, and the next at the bat fell for a like fate, but the third found Joe's curve and swatted the ball for two bags.

"Oh, well, Joe just allowed that so you fellows wouldn't get discouraged," exclaimed Teeter as an excuse for his pitcher. "Get ready to slaughter the next man, Joe."

And Joe did. He was delighted to find that his ability to curve the ball, and send it swiftly in, had not deserted him during the long winter of comparative inactivity. He knew that he could "come back with the goods," and there was a feeling of hope welling up within him, that, after all, there might come a chance for him to pitch on the Excelsior nine.

The game went on, not regular, nor played according to the rules by any means. But it was lots of fun, and some of the lads discovered their weak points, while others found themselves doing better than they expected. Joe's side won by a small margin, and just as the winning run came in our hero was aware of a figure walking toward the bench on which the side was sitting.

"Huh! Starting off rather early, ain't you?" demanded a voice, and they turned to behold Luke

Fodick. "Who said you fellows could use the diamond, anyhow?"

"We didn't ask anybody," retorted Teeter with a snap.

"Well, you want to—after this," was the surly command. "I'm captain of the nine and what I say goes. I'm not going to have the diamond all torn up before the season opens, see! I'm captain!"

"Not yet," spoke Peaches quietly. "The election isn't until next week."

"What's that got to do with it? You ain't thinking of running opposition to me; are you?"

"No," and a bright spot burned on the fair cheeks of the light-complexioned lad.

"Because if you are you'll have a fight on your hands," threatened Luke. "Who's been pitching?" he asked, his gaze roving over the crowd of lads.

"I was for our side," replied Joe quietly.

"Oh, you—yes I heard about you!" exclaimed Luke with a grating laugh. "You're the fellow who wants to pitch on the nine; ain't you? Well, you want to get that bee out of your bonnet, or you may get stung, see? Hiram told me about you. Why, you are only an amateur. We want the best here at Excelsior. By Jove, it's queer how tacky

some of you high school kids get as soon as you come to a real institution. Talk about nerve, I——”

Joe fairly leaped from the bench. In another stride he confronted Luke.

“Look here!” cried our hero, anger getting the best of him for the time being, “I’ve taken all of that kind of talk I’m going to either from you or Bully Shell! Now you keep still or I’ll make you. I’ll give you the best licking you ever had; and I’ll do it right here and now if you say another word about my pitching! I didn’t come here to take any of your sneers, and I don’t intend to. Now you put that in your pipe, and smoke it, and then close up and stay closed,” and shaking his finger so close to the astonished Luke that it hit the buttons on his coat Joe turned back and sat down.

CHAPTER VIII

“WHO WILL PITCH?”

FOR a moment there was silence—a sort of awed silence—and Teeter uttered a faint cheer.

“That’s the way to talk!” he exclaimed.

“You’re all right!” declared Peaches.

Luke turned and glared at them. Afterward several lads said the bully’s toady looked dazed, as if he did not understand what had happened.

“He’ll go tell Hiram now, and he’ll be laying for you, Joe,” was Tom’s opinion.

“Let him. I’m ready to meet that bully whenever he is, and I’m not afraid, either.”

“That’s the way to talk!” exclaimed Teeter admiringly. “If Hiram got one good licking he wouldn’t be quite so uppish. But I’m afraid this will put you on the fritz for the nine, Joe.”

“I don’t care if it does. I’m going to let ’em know what I think.”

Yet in the quietness of his room that night Joe rather regretted what he had done. He realized

that he might have turned off Luke's insult with a laugh.

"For if I had done so I'd stand a better chance of getting on the nine," mused Joe.

Then a different feeling came to him.

"No, I couldn't do that either," he reflected. "I'm not built that way. I'm not going to lie down and be walked on, nine or no nine, and I'm going to find some way to play ball, at that!"

There was a determined look on Joe's face, and he squared his shoulders in a way that meant business. If Hiram and his crony could have seen our hero then they might not have been so sure of what they would do to him.

"So that's how he acted, eh?" asked the bully, when his crony had reported to him what Joe had said. "Well, he'll get *his* all right. He'll never play ball here as long as I am manager.

"No, nor while I'm captain," added Luke. "Nor that friend of his either, Tom Davis."

"That's right; we'll make it so hot here for both of 'em that they'll leave at the end of the term," predicted Hiram.

What a pity he did not know that Joe and Tom were not of the "leaving" kind. The hotter it was the better they liked it, for they both came of fighting stock.

But with all his nerve, and not regretting in the least what he had done, Joe was a bit uneasy as the time for the baseball organization meeting drew near. He hoped against hope that somehow he might get on the team, but he did not see how. He talked with other students, and they all told him that Hiram, Luke and their crowd ran things to suit themselves.

"But I've got something up my sleeve," declared Tom. "There may be a surprise at the meeting."

"What are you up to?" asked Joe. "Nothing rash, I hope."

"You wait and see," his chum advised. "I'm not saying anything."

As the days went by, Tom might have been seen talking in confidential whispers to many students. He made lots of new friends, and it was remarked that they were neither of the "sporting set," nor the crowd that trained with Hiram and Luke. To all questions Tom turned a deaf ear, and went on his way serenely.

It was almost a foregone conclusion as to who would constitute the nine, with the exception of the pitchers. As already explained, the students who, as regular and substitute, had filled the box the previous season had left, and it was up to Hiram

and Luke to find new pitchers. Hiram did not play on the nine, being content to manage it, but Luke was catcher and some of the friends of Joe and Tom filled regular places.

"How do you dope it out?" asked Tom of Peaches one day, shortly before the organization meeting.

"Well, it'll be about like this," was the reply. "We will all gather in the gymnasium—as many as want to—and Hiram will be in the chair. He'll call the meeting to order and state what we're there for, which everyone knows already, without being told. Then he'll ask for nominations for secretary, and one of his friends will go in. Then he'll spout about what we ought to do to win this season, and how to do it, and say we're sure to be at the head of the league and win the Blue Banner and all like that.

"Then he'll ask for nominations for players and they'll be voted on; we'll have a little chinning about money matters, Hiram may say who the first few games will be with, and it will be all over but the shouting."

"Well, won't lots of fellows have a chance to nominate players, or won't the players themselves ask to be given a chance?"

"Oh, yes, but what's the use? It's all cut and dried."

"Who'll be on the nine?"

"I can pretty near tell you, all but the pitcher. And that will lay between Frank Brown and Larry Akers—both friends of Hiram. Luke will catch—that's a cinch. George Bland will be in centre-field. I may be at first, though I doubt it."

"Why?"

"Oh, because I dared to say Joe was right for answering Luke back that time. I'll probably be sent out in the daisies, but I don't care, for with Luke catching it's no easy matter to hold down the first bag. He throws so rotten high. Then Teeter will be on second. Nat Pierson on third, Harry Lauter in right, Jake Weston at short, and Charlie Borden in left. That's how it will be."

"And no show for Joe?"

"I can't see any, nor for you, either."

"Oh, I don't care about myself, but I'm interested in Joe. I *do* wish he could pitch."

"I'm afraid he can't," answered Peaches with a sigh. "I'd almost be willing to give my place to him, but I'm not altogether sure that I'll get on the nine, though I'm going to make a big fight for it."

"Oh, Joe wouldn't think of doing anything like that!" objected Tom. "But maybe my plan will

work. If it does, Hiram won't have so much to say as he does now."

"I hope to gracious you can work something. It's rotten the way things are now, and it is our own fault, too. But I'm afraid it's too late to change. No, you can figure that the nine is already made up between Hiram and Luke—that is, all but pitcher."

"Then I think Joe has a chance!" exclaimed Tom. "I'm not going to give up until the last minute. I'm working hard for him, but don't say anything to him about it. I want to surprise him."

"I'm afraid it will be a disagreeable surprise," commented Peaches, as he left his friend.

The time for the meeting was at hand and on all sides there seemed to be but one question:

"Who will pitch?"

There were many shakes of heads and much speculation, but Hiram and Luke kept their own counsel.

CHAPTER IX

TOM'S PLAN FAILS

"THE meeting will come to order!" called Hiram. "I'll cuff some of you fellows over the head if you don't sit down."

It was rather an unparliamentary way of doing things, but it proved effective, and at length quiet reigned. As Peaches had said, Hiram began by stating what they were there for, and by announcing that the make-up of the nine was in order.

Some unimportant business was disposed of, there were remarks from several lads about what the season might have in store, there were many determinations expressed about how well the Excelsior team would play that season, and then Hiram said:

"Nominations for the team are in order. Of course we expect that there will be a lot more fellows named than we can use, but there'll probably be a weeding-out when we get at practice. The team named to-night will only be a tentative one."

"Like pie!" murmured Tom. "You and Luke have it all up your sleeves."

"Has the nominating committee anything to report?" asked Hiram, looking over at Luke. His crony arose. Luke was chairman of the nominating committee, as well as chairman of the committee on membership.

"Your committee would recommend the following names," said Luke, and then he read off most of those named by Peaches to Tom. He did not call off his own name, however, and there was a blank opposite the positions of pitcher and left field.

"Say, what's the matter, don't I play?" demanded Peaches, jumping up.

"Oh, yes," answered Luke quickly. "But we haven't just decided where. I'm going to leave that with Hiram, and also the position for left field."

"Well, I'll settle it right now!" exclaimed the manager. "You'll play left field, Peaches, and Charlie Borden will move up from there to first base."

"What did I tell you?" murmured Peaches to Tom. "What about the stunt you were going to pull off?"

"It isn't time yet. See the gang I have with

me?" and Tom motioned to a lot of lads in the rear of the hall.

"What is it—a rough house?" asked Peaches, and then he noticed for the first time that the athletic meeting was much better attended than usual.

"Those are new members," declared Tom in a whisper. "I'm counting on turning the balance of power away from Hiram and the crowd with him. I've been canvassing the last week, and I've got a lot of fellows to join who never took an interest in sports before."

"Oh, ho! So that's your game!" exclaimed Peaches. "Well, it's a good one all right."

"They'll all vote for Joe for pitcher," went on Tom.

"I notice that there are still two vacancies in the team," spoke Jake Weston, who had been named as shortstop. "We had such success with Luke as catcher last year, that I move that he again go behind the bat."

"Second it," sung out Harry Lauter.

"It has been moved and seconded," began Hiram, and there came a shout of "ayes" before he had finished.

"That's the way it always is," whispered Peaches. "Luke pretends he's too modest to

name himself, and some one else does it for him. Oh, the cut-and-dried program is going through all right! "

"Wait and see," suggested Tom with a wink.

"Are the selections of the nominating committee sanctioned?" asked Hiram.

Again came a chorus of "ayes."

"What about the pitcher?" asked Luke. "Will you name him, Hiram?"

"Yes!" said the manager and he looked about the room until his eyes lit on those of Joe. "I'll name Frank Brown as regular pitcher with Larry Akers as substitute."

Again came the chorus of confirmation.

"Just as I told you," murmured Peaches.

Tom was on his feet as the murmurs died away. Hiram was speaking.

"That completes the regular nine," the manager said, "and it only remains to name the substitutes. I think we will let them go until you fellows have had some practice, so we can get a line on you. There's time enough. We'll begin regular practice next week, if the weather permits, and then I'll arrange for games. I have some in prospect, and the Blue Banner——"

"Mr. Chairman!" interrupted Tom.

"Well, what is it?" snapped Hiram. "I'm talking, and I don't want anyone to butt in."

"I rise to a point of order," went on Tom, in a loud voice. "The nominations have not been closed, and I want to put in nomination the name of a friend, who is one of the best pitchers that ever——"

"None of that!" cried Hiram. "Get down to business. I'll allow your point of order. Who do you name?"

"Joe Matson!" cried Tom, "and——"

"You can't elect him, what's the use of trying?" sneered Luke.

"Maybe I can't, with your crowd, but I came here to-night with some friends of mine, new members of the athletic committee, and they'll vote for Joe, and I think we can outvote you!" cried Tom defiantly.

"That's right!" yelled the lads toward whom he waved his hand. "Joe Matson for pitcher."

Luke turned pale. So did Hiram as they looked at each other. This was something they had not counted on—an effective trick.

"For myself and for these new members I demand a vote on the name of Joe Matson!" went on Tom, ignoring Joe's efforts to stop him.

"That's right—we're for Joe!" yelled the

new crowd. There were many of them, and with the usual element always ready to break away from him, Hiram knew that he would lose on the combination.

"One moment!" he shouted, banging his gavel. Then he hurried over to Luke and the two conferred excitedly, while there was a near-pandemonium in the gymnasium.

"I have an announcement to make!" shouted Hiram after a bit, making his way back to the platform. "It is true that you have the right to nominate any one you please—that is, a member of the athletic committee has, and members have the right to vote as they please. But I have to inform this audience that Sister Davis is not yet a fully-qualified member of this committee. That is not just yet." Hiram sneered disagreeably.

"Why not? I signed my application, was properly endorsed, and paid in my dues!" cried Tom. "And so did these other fellows."

"That's right," shouted his crowd in a chorus.

"Very true," went on Hiram coolly. He was master of the situation now, and he knew it. "But there is a rule of this organization, which states that at the discretion of the chairman, and the manager and captain of the team, or any two of them, new members may be taken on pro-

bation for three months, and during that term of probation they have no voting power, so you see——”

“That’s an old rule!”

“It’s never been enforced!”

“It’s rotten!”

“That’s only a trick!”

These were some of the cries that greeted the announcement Hiram made.

“It may never have been enforced, but it’s going to be *now*!” he shouted. “It was made to cover just such snap cases as this. You tried to work a trick, Tom Davis, but you got left. You and those other lads can’t vote for three months, and so the team stands as originally named.”

“But we have no captain—your rule won’t work. You said the manager, chairman and captain could apply that rule. Who is the captain?” demanded Tom, as he saw his game blocked.

“Luke Fodick is captain of this nine; isn’t he?” shouted Hiram, closing the last loophole.

“Aye!” yelled the bully’s crowd.

“No!” yelled Tom’s.

“The ayes have it,” announced the chairman, “and Luke and I agreed on enforcing that rule at this time. Besides, I am acting as chairman

in place of Henry Clay, who isn't present, and I have his voting proxy, so Henry and I also agree on it, if you question the election of Luke."

"That ends it," murmured Peaches in Tom's ear. "Henry Clay never does preside as chairman. He's only a figurehead for Hiram, and that's well known. Hiram always votes for him. I guess you're beaten Tom."

"I'm afraid so. I wish I'd known about that rule."

"I'd forgotten it myself," admitted Peaches. "It's rotten, but you can't do anything unless you outvote Hiram."

The bully was smiling mockingly at Tom and Joe. The young pitcher felt rather foolish, but he gave Tom credit for originating a bold move and one that, under ordinary circumstances, would have been effective.

"You may renew your nomination in three months. if you like, Sister Davis," spoke Hiram sarcastically "as you and the others will then be voting members. I believe that is about all the business to come before us to-night." And he announced the adjournment of the meeting.

CHAPTER X

THE BANNER PARADE

INSTANTLY following Hiram's words a hub-bub burst out in the gymnasium. Everyone seemed to be talking at once, and the crowd of boys split up into two factions.

There were those who were with Joe and Tom in their contention, and who thought that they had not been given a fair opportunity. Among these were, of course, the lads who had not hitherto belonged to the athletic committee, and who had been induced by Tom to put in their applications.

On the other side were what might be called the "conservatives," those who, while not exactly favoring Hiram and his high-handed methods, preferred to take the easiest way and let the old order of things prevail.

Then, too, was a smaller crowd of distinct "Shellites" as Peaches dubbed them—friends and close cronies of the manager who sided with him in all things and looked upon him as a sort

of hero. Chief among them, of course, was Luke Fodick, and perhaps next in line stood Charlie Borden, who had replaced Peaches at first.

"It's a rotten, mean shame!" burst out Teeter as he came over to where Tom, Joe and Peaches were standing. "I'm not going to stand for it, either!"

"Well, what can you do?" asked the practical Peaches. "They have it on us good and proper. There's the rule."

"Well, I don't like it, but I'm going to stay here just the same," snapped Tom.

"And so am I," added Joe frankly. "There's no use saying I don't care, for I do. I'd like to get on the team. But if I can't—why I'll root for 'em, that's all."

"Maybe you'll be picked as one of the subs," was what Charlie Borden said. "We always have lots of them to make up the scrub nine. But frankly, Matson, I don't think you'll pitch. Frank Brown is going to make good, and if he doesn't Larry Akers will."

He turned to join some of his own particular crowd, and with them continued the discussion of the unexpected turn given to the athletic meeting. Hiram and Luke were surrounded by a throng of their cronies, and from time to time there

could be heard from them such remarks as:

"Serves 'em good and right for trying to butt in."

"What right have new fellows to try to run our affairs for us, anyhow?"

"You sat on 'em proper, Hiram."

"Yes, Luke and I fixed up that scheme," answered the bully, with no little pride.

Joe heard, and the thought came to him that possibly there might be a split in the ranks of the lads—a school divided against itself, and on his account. He took a quick resolve.

Striding over to Hiram he held out his hand, saying with a frank smile:

"Hiram, don't think for a minute I'm sore. It's all right, and I haven't a word to say. I did want to get on the nine, but I realize that I am a new lad here, and maybe next year things will be different. I'm for the team first, last and always. Will you shake on it—you and Luke?"

For a moment the bully eyed our hero. Luke, too, gazed at him with a sneer on his face. Then as a little murmur of admiration for Joe's conduct arose—a murmur in which some of Hiram's own friends joined—the latter knew that it was the wisest policy to be at least outwardly friendly with Joe.

"All right, Matson," replied Hiram. "I guess you can come in. I'm sorry if you feel hurt about the way we run things here at Excelsior Hall, but——"

"Not at all—'to the victors belong the spoils.' " quoted Joe. "Maybe you'll let me play on the scrub."

"Sure, if there's a chance," put in Luke eagerly. He, too, saw which way the wind was likely to blow, and noting that Hiram had changed his conduct toward Joe it was up to the bully's toady to do the same. "You can play on the scrub all you want to," Luke added.

Hiram held out his hand and, though the clasp he gave Joe might have been more friendly, our hero took the will for the deed. Luke, also, shook hands, and thus, for the time being, the threatened breach was closed. But Joe knew, and Hiram knew, that never could there be real friendship between them.

Some of the lads began leaving the gymnasium now. There was more talk about the coming ball season, and some still persisted in denouncing the high-handed methods of the manager and his crowd. But in the main the feeling was smothered, due chiefly to Joe's manly act. The

young pitcher even remained for a while chatting with Hiram, Luke and some of their cronies.

"Say, you sure did have your nerve with you, when you shook hands with those two sneaks," remarked Tom, when he and Joe reached their room, a little later.

"Yes, it did take nerve, but it was the only thing to do. I'm a thousand times obliged to you, Tom, for what you did for me, and——"

"For what I didn't do for you, I guess you mean," interrupted his chum with a smile. "Well, I meant all right, but they beat us out. But I'm not done trying. Joe, you're going to pitch on the first nine of Excelsior Hall before this season is over, or I'll eat my hat."

"I wish I could believe so," replied Joe with a little sigh of longing.

Baseball practice formally opened the next day, which proved unexpectedly warm and spring-like. The diamond was in good shape, and a crowd of lads turned out. A host of candidates did their "stunts" and Luke and Hiram "sized them up." Joe wanted to pitch on the tentative scrub nine that was picked to play against the first team, but Luke, who seemed to manage the second squad as well as the first, sent our hero out in the field, as he also did Tom.

"Never mind," consoled Peaches, who was on the first team. "Luke doesn't captain the scrub when it's formed regularly, and when the fellow is picked out who is to have charge I'll speak for you, Joe."

"Thanks. I would like a chance to get in the box."

That the first nine had many weak spots was soon made plain to captain and manager, and, to give them credit, they at once set at work correcting them.

"I'll get Dr. Rudden out to give you fellows some pointers as soon as we're in a little better shape," said Hiram, referring to the instructor who usually acted as coach.

"Yes, and you fellows need it all right," said Tom in a low voice.

"Everybody in the gym right after the game," ordered Hiram, during a lull in the play. "We're going to arrange about the Blue Banner parade."

"What's that," asked Joe of Teeter.

"Oh, every year all the teams in the Inter-scholastic League meet and have a parade to sort of open the season. The nine that holds the banner marches at the head, we have a band, and after that a little feed and it's jolly fun. You'll like it."

"Morningside holds the banner now, doesn't she?"

"Yes, worse luck. It ought to come here, and would have if Hiram and Luke had run things differently last year. But they wouldn't listen to reason. Well, I've got to play ball. See you at the meeting."

The regulars won the ball game by a small margin, and then the lads trooped off to the gymnasium to the meeting. It was much more friendly and enthusiastic than the organization session had been, and arrangements were quickly made for taking part in the annual parade.

"As is the custom," said Hiram, "We will all meet on the grounds of the school that holds the Blue Banner—that's Morningside, I'm sorry to say, but next season will be different. We are going to win the Blue Banner this time."

"That's what he always says," murmured Peaches in Tom's ear.

"So we will meet on the Morningside diamond, do the regular marching stunt and have a feed there. It will be necessary for you fellows to chip in for part of the expenses as our treasury is low just now. It won't be much. Now the parade committee will meet to talk over details, and so will the rooting crowd. Get busy now,

fellows; we want to make a good showing in the parade."

The Interscholastic League, of which the Blue Banner was the trophy, consisted of these schools beside Morningside Academy and Excelsior Hall: Trinity School, Woodside Hall and the Lakeview Preparatory Institute—or, more briefly the Lakeview Prep., which I shall call it.

In the parade of the nines of these institutions, and the followers of them, there were always some novel features, and the lads tried to outdo each other in singing, cheering or giving their school yells. A committee generally had charge of the cheering and yelling contingents, and this body of students for Excelsior now got busy making up new war-cries.

The day of the parade was a glorious one. It was Saturday, naturally, as that was the only time the students could be free. Early in the afternoon a big crowd left Excelsior Hall, the nine and the substitutes, including Joe and Tom, in their uniforms, each carrying a bat as an insignia of office. Morningside Academy was about five miles from Excelsior, and could be reached by trolley. Several special cars carried our hero and his companions.

All the other marching contingents save Trin-

ity were on hand when the Excelsior lads arrived at Morningside, and they were noisily greeted. A few minutes later the Trinity lads arrived and then pandemonium broke loose.

"Say, this is great!" cried Joe, as cheer after cheer, and school-yell after school-yell, rent the air. "I guess we'll have some fun after all, Tom."

"Oh, sure. It's jolly."

The managers of the parade were rushing wildly to and fro, trying to get things in shape for the start. Lads who had not seen each other for some time were exchanging greetings, and the members of the various nines were talking "shop" to their hearts' content.

"Get in line! Get in line!" cried the marshals. "We're going to start."

The lads were to parade around the Morningside diamond, as a sort of tribute to the winning team of the league and then go down through the town to the public square, where the yelling, cheering and singing would take place. Then they were to come back to Morningside for the feast.

The band struck up a lively air and a silence fell over the crowd. Then, out from the midst of the throng came the lads of Morningside.

They were to lead the line, as was their right, by virtue of being champions, and as they swung into formation Joe looked at them with critical eyes. Here was the doughty foe of his school.

His gaze fell upon one sturdy lad who carried a staff—carried it proudly—and no wonder, for, floating from it was the Blue Banner, glorious in gold embroidery and silver lace—the Blue Banner of the Interscholastic League—the trophy which meant so much.

“ ‘Rah! ‘Rah! ‘Rah!’ ” yelled the lads. “ Three cheers for the Blue Banner! ”

And how those cheers welled out! The lad carrying the banner dipped it in response to the salute.

Joe felt his heart strangely beating. A mist of tears came into his eyes—not tears of regret, but rather tears of joy and pride, that he belonged to the school which had a right to fight for that banner. Ah, if he could but enter that struggle himself!

Slowly the Morningside lads filed to their places. Louder played the band. There were more cheers, more salutes to the blue trophy, and then the banner parade was under way.

CHAPTER XI

JOE HOPES AND FEARS

AROUND the Morningside diamond marched the singing, cheering and yelling lads. The Blue Banner fluttered in the Spring breeze, and not a student in the crowd but either hoped it would stay in the possession of the present owners, or would come to his school, the desires varying according to the allegiance of the wisher.

It was a gala occasion for the town of Morningside, this Blue Banner parade, and the people turned out in great numbers to watch the lads. Throngs came from neighboring towns and villages, and some even from a distant city, for the boys could always be depended on to make the occasion enjoyable.

The Excelsior Hall crowd did some new "stunts." Under the leadership of Luke and Hiram they rendered some odd songs and yells, and then, as they passed around the public square, Hiram executed his main surprise. The leader



AROUND THE MORNINGSIDE DIAMOND MARCHED THE
SINGING, CHEERING AND YELLING LADS.

of Excelsior, none other than Luke Fodick, had been carrying a pole, on the top of which was a canvas bundle. It was tied about with strings in such a manner that, by pulling on one cord the wrapping would fall off, as when a statue is unveiled. To all questions as to what was on the pole under the canvas Luke and Hiram returned only evasive replies.

But on reaching the public square, when the cheering was at its height, Luke pulled the string. At once there floated from the staff an "effigy" of the Blue Banner. It was made of blue calico and worked on it in strands of yellow rope were the words:

WE'LL HAVE THE REAL BANNER THIS YEAR!

Surmounting the odd trophy was a stuffed eagle, rather the worse for being moth-eaten, and worn "to a frazzle," as Tom said. But it made a hit, and the yells of laughter bore evidence of how the crowd appreciated it.

"Guess we've made good all right," said Hiram to his crony. "There's nothing else like it in the parade."

"That's right," answered Luke. "Oh, it takes us to do things."

"And sometimes *not* do them," murmured Teeter. "We ought to have the real banner."

"Maybe we will," spoke Joe.

The other schools had their own specialties in singing, cutting queer capers, or in cheers, and made hits in their own way. Around the square marched the lads, and then, with a final chorus, rendered by all the students, the parade was over. Back to Morningside Academy they went, and sat down to what the papers described later as a "sumptuous repast; a feast of reason and a flow of soul."

Jolly good fellowship prevailed at the board. Speeches were made, toasts responded to, and baseball talk flowed on all sides. Hiram and Luke made remarks, as did the managers and captains of the other nines. Predictions were freely expressed as to who would have the banner the next year, and then came more singing, more cheering and more yelling.

The dinner broke up finally, and then the various managers and captains got together to arrange the Interscholastic League schedule of games.

"Well, it was all right; wasn't it?" asked Tom of Joe, when they were on their way back to Excelsior Hall.

"Fine and dandy," was the answer. "They're a nice lot of fellows—all of 'em."

"Quite some class to those Trinity School lads," remarked Tom. "It's a swell place—a lot of millionaires' sons go there I understand."

"Yes, but I hobnobbed with some of 'em, and they weren't a bit uppish. Right good fellows, I thought."

"Oh, yes, all millionaire lads aren't cads though money sometimes makes a chap that way. Trinity must be quite a school."

"I guess it is, but Excelsior is good enough for me. We're in with a dandy crowd of fellows, though, and that makes it nice if you've got to play a lot of games with 'em. Nothing like class when it comes to sport. We ought to have some corking good games this Summer."

"I only wish you and I were more in it," went on Tom.

"Wait until we see about the scrub," suggested him chum. "I'm not worrying as much as I was at first."

But, though Joe thus lightly passed over the matter, deep down in his heart there was a great longing. To him baseball meant more than to the average player. From the time when he had seen his first game, as a little chap, our hero had fairly lived, eaten and slept in an atmosphere of the diamond. He had organized a team of lads

when he was scarcely nine years old, and played those little chaps in a sort of improvised circuit.

Then, as he grew, and developed, and found that he could pitch, the world seemed to hold something worth while for Joe Matson. "Baseball Joe," he had been dubbed, when as a small chap he shouldered his bat and started off across the lots to a game, and "Baseball Joe" he was yet.

How he longed to be on the regular nine, even in the outfield, none but himself knew. And when he dreamed of the possibility that he might some time occupy the pitching mound—well, he had to stop short, for he found himself indulging in a too high flight of fancy.

"Get back to earth, Joe," he told himself. "If you want to pitch for Excelsior you've got to do a heap of waiting, and you are pretty good at that game."

And so Joe had hopes and fears—hopes that his dream might come true, and fears lest the enmity of Hiram and Luke would keep him one of the "scrubbiest of the scrubs."

He was tired after the excitement of the parade, and so was Tom, but they were not too weary to accept an invitation to gather in the room of Teeter and Peaches that night for a sur-

reptitious lunch of ginger snaps, cheese and bottled soda water, which had been smuggled in. And, as before, the lads took the same precautions with the fake books and the tubes, hose and bottles. But they were not disturbed.

"Well, we'll have to get busy next week," remarked Teeter as he slowly sipped his glass.

"How so?" asked Joe.

"Hard practice against the scrub starts Monday."

"Who's captain of the scrub; did you hear?" asked Peaches eagerly.

"Yes, Ward Gerard—a nice fellow, too."

"That's the stuff!" cried Peaches. "Now there's a chance for you, Joe. Ward's room is on this corridor. I'm going to see him."

"You'll be caught," warned Teeter.

"Caught nothing!" retorted his chum. "It's so late none of the profs. or monitors will think a fellow will dare go out. Ward isn't an early sleeper, and I'm going to see him and ask him to let Joe pitch on the scrub before some one else gets the place. I'll be back in a few minutes, fellows. Don't eat up all the grub," and with that Peaches slipped noiselessly from the room.

CHAPTER XII

ON THE SCRUB

"IT DOESN'T take Peaches long to make up his mind," remarked Tom.

"No, he's always right on the job," agreed Teeter.

"It's mighty good of him—and all of you—to go to all this trouble and fuss on my account," added Joe. "I appreciate it, too."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Teeter, as he balanced himself on his toes to see if it was safe to indulge in any more cheese and ginger snaps. "We're glad to do it. I only hope you do make the team, and pitch, at that."

"If I can pitch on the scrub, I'll be satisfied for a while."

"We want to make Excelsior the best nine in the league this year," went on Teeter. "We've got to have the Blue Banner, and one way we can cinch it is to have a good pitcher."

"Thanks!" laughed Joe.

"Well, I mean it," resumed Teeter, helping himself to a handful of the crisp snaps. "That's where our weak point was last season. Many a game we gave away after we had it practically won, just because our pitchers went up in the air. And I'm afraid it'll be the same now. Frank Brown isn't much, unless he's improved a whole lot over season, and I don't believe he has. And as for Larry Akers—well, he's only a make-shift. Now, I'd like to see——"

But Teeters' little talk was interrupted by the sound of footsteps in the corridor outside. For a moment the lads gazed anxiously at each other, and Tom made a grab for one of the fake books, but a look of relief came over their faces when the door opened and Peaches entered, followed by some one.

"I brought Ward with me," explained the lad with the fair complexion. "Thought it was the safest way. Come on in, Ward; I guess these Indians haven't scalped all the grub."

"Yes, fall to," invited Teeter. "There's plenty."

"Charmed, I'm sure," murmured Ward with an assumed society air.

"You know Joe Matson, of course," went on Peaches.

"Oh, sure. He beat me in physics class the other week and I haven't forgotten it."

"He wants to pitch on the scrub," went on the originator of the scheme. "He's all to the mustard, too, and——"

"Say, let me say a word for myself," put in Joe. "I'm not a political candidate in the hands of my friends. Is there a show for me on the scrub, Ward?"

"Well, I haven't made up the team yet, and you're the first applicant for pitcher, so you'll have first choice."

"Then it's as good as settled!" declared Peaches. "When do you make up the team, Ward?"

"To-morrow, I guess. I'll put you down as first pitcher, Joe, and I hope you can throw a scare into the school team—not because I'm not on it myself, but the better opposition they have, the better they'll play for the banner."

"What about Hiram?" asked Tom. "Won't he kick up a fuss if he knows you've got Joe? And what about Luke?"

"Say, I'm running the scrub!" exclaimed Ward. "They haven't anything to say after I take charge. What I say goes!"

"That's right," agreed Teeter. "I'll do

Hiram that much justice. He never interferes with the scrub after the season starts. Neither does Luke. They have their hands full managing their own players."

"Then I guess I'll get a chance to pitch," murmured Joe, and he was happier than he had been in some time. It was only a small beginning, but it was a start, and that meant a good deal.

Ward Gerard, whom Joe and Tom did not know very well, turned out to be a good-natured and pleasant companion. He was one of the new arrivals at the school, but already stood well in his classes and on the athletic field. Football was his specialty, but he was none the less a good baseball player and might have made the first team had he tried harder.

The boys talked of the diamond until the booming of the big school clock warned them that they had better get to bed; so with good-nights and a renewed promise on the part of Ward to place Joe in the box, the conference broke up.

"Oh, things are coming your way slowly," remarked Tom, as he and Joe reached their room, having successfully dodged a prying monitor on the look-out for rule violators.

"Yes, and now I've got to make good."

"You can do that easily enough. You always

have. And when the three months are up I'm going to make my motion over again, and I'll bet we'll elect you as regular pitcher."

"I guess you forget that when the three months are up the Summer vacation will be here and the nine will be out of business," remarked Joe. "No, I've got to work my own way, I guess."

There were some murmurs of surprise when it was announced the next day that Joe Matson was to be the scrub pitcher. Friends of rival candidates urged their claims on Ward, but he stuck to his promise and the place went to Joe.

"Did Hiram or Luke say anything when you told them?" asked Tom of the scrub captain.

"Oh, yes—a little."

"What was it?"

"Nothing very pleasant, so don't repeat it to Joe, but Hiram wanted to know why I didn't pick out a decent fellow to pitch against the first team, and Luke remarked that Joe would be knocked out of the box in the first practice game, and that I'd have to get some one else."

"Oh, Luke said that, did he?" asked Tom, and there was a look of smothered anger in his eyes.

"Yes, and then some more."

"Just wait until the first game—that's all," requested Tom quietly. "If they knock Joe Matson out of the box it will be the first time it's happened since he found that he was a real pitcher."

"There are some pretty good batters on the first team," warned Ward.

"That's the kind Joe likes," replied his chum. "Just you wait; that's all."

It was the day for the first regular practice between the scrub and first teams. For several afternoons Joe had been pitching to Bob Harrison, who often acted as the scrub catcher, and as there was so much other individual playing going on no one had paid much attention to the work of our hero.

"Say, I think we've got a 'find' all right," announced Bob to Ward, just before the practice game was called.

"How so?" asked the scrub captain.

"Why, that Matson can sting 'em in for further orders, and he's got some of the prettiest curves that ever came over the plate. The Hiram-Luke crowd is going to sit up and take notice, take it from yours truly."

"I'm glad of it!" declared Ward. "We'll do our best to beat 'em, and it will be for their

own good. They're soft, naturally at the beginning of the season, and so are we, but if we can wallop 'em, so much the better. Have you and Joe got your signals down?"

"Yes, he's better at that than I am. He must have played some pretty good games."

"So Sister Davis says. Well, here they come. Now to see what we can do?"

There was a conference between Luke and Ward, and in order to give his team the most severe kind of a try-out, Luke arranged to let the scrub bat last.

The first practice game was important in more ways than one. Not only did it open the season for Excelsior Hall, but it would show up the weak players, and, while the first team was practically picked, there might be a change in it. At least so every lad who was not on it, but wanted to be, thought, and he hoped against hope that his playing might attract the attention of the manager.

Another thing was that Dr. Rudden, the coach, sometimes took a hand in the baseball affairs and occasionally he had been known to over-ride the judgment of Hiram and Luke, insisting that some player whom they had not picked be allowed to show what he could do on the first team. So there were many hearts that beat high with hope,

and among them was Joe's. And there were hearts that were a bit anxious—to wit, members of the first team who were not quite sure of themselves.

There was a large crowd in the grandstand and on the bleachers when the gong rang to start the game—a throng of students mostly, for the general public was not admitted so early in the season.

It was a good day for the game, albeit the ground was a trifle soft, and the Spring wind not as warm as might be. The boys in their spick and span new uniforms made a natty appearance as they trotted out on the diamond.

According to custom, Dr. Fillmore, the venerable head of the school, pitched the first ball formally to open the season. It was a sort of complimentary ball, and was not expected to be struck at.

“Play ball!” yelled the umpire as he took the new horsehide sphere from its tinfoil wrapping and handed it to Dr. Fillmore. The president bowed as though about to make a speech, and Joe, who was in the box, stepped back. Our hero's heart was thumping under his blouse, for at last he was about to pitch his first game at Excelsior Hall, even if it was but on the scrub.

CHAPTER XIII

JOE'S GREAT WORK

"LET her go, Doctor!"

"Make him hit it, Professor!"

"Strike him out!"

"Give him an old Greek curve!"

These were some of the cries that reached Dr. Fillmore as he stood in Joe's place in the pitching box. The president of the faculty smiled pleasantly. He was used to this mild "joshing," which was always indulged in by the lads of Excelsior on the occasion of the opening of the season. Not that it was at all offensive; in fact, it rather showed the good feeling existing between the instructors and their pupils.

"Are you all ready?" asked Dr. Fillmore, as though he was inquiring whether a student was prepared to recite, and as if he really expected to pitch a ball that was to be hit.

"Play ball!" called Harvey Hallock, who was umpiring.

"Not too swift now, if you please, Doctor," stipulated Nat Pierson, who was first up.

Then the venerable president delivered the new, white horsehide sphere. He threw rather awkwardly, but with more accuracy than might have been expected from a man who had a ball in his hands but once a year. Right over the plate it went, and though usually the initial ball was never struck at, Nat could not resist the opportunity.

He "bunted," and the ball popped up in the air and sailed back toward the pitcher's box. To the surprise of all, Dr. Fillmore stepped forward and neatly caught it.

"Hurrray!"

"That's the stuff!"

"Put him on the team!"

"Why didn't you say you were a ball-player, Doctor?"

"Let him play the game!"

These and many other cries greeted the president's performance. He bowed again, gravely, and smiled genially as he tossed the ball to Joe, who was waiting for it. A little round of applause came from some members of the faculty who had accompanied the doctor to the grounds, and then the head of the school walked off the diamond amid a riot of cheers. The baseball season at Ex-

celsior Hall had opened under auspicious occasions everyone thought, and more than one lad had great hopes that the Blue Banner would come back there to stay for a while.

"Play ball!" called the umpire again, and this time the game was on in earnest.

Joe dug a little hole for the toe of his shoe, revolved the ball in his hands a few times, and looked to get the signal from Bob Harrison, the scrub catcher.

Bob, who knew the individual characteristics of each batter better than did Joe (though the latter was rapidly learning them) signalled for a high out, and our hero nodded his head in confirmation. The next instant he delivered the ball.

There was a vicious swing of the bat, and there could almost be heard the swish as it cut the air. And that is all it did do, for the horsehide landed squarely in Bob's glove with a resounding ping! and there was one strike against Nat.

"That's the way to do it!" cried Bob.

"Say, what's the matter with you?" angrily demanded Luke Fodick of one of his best batters. "What do you want to fan for?"

"Couldn't help it, I guess," answered Bob rather sheepishly. "It was a curve."

"Well, don't you know how to handle them by

this time?" fairly snarled Hiram, who was closely watching every player. "If you don't know how to hit out a hot one you'd better go back on the scrub. Don't do it again."

"I'll kill the next ball!" declared Nat, but he did not like the looks of it as Joe delivered it, and did not swing his bat.

"Strike!" called the umpire sharply.

"Wha—what?" cried Nat.

"I said strike. It was right over the plate."

"Plate nothing!"

"What's he doing, calling strikes on you?" demanded Hiram.

"It looks that way," spoke Nat.

"Well, say——" began the manager in his bullying manner, as he strode toward the umpire.

"Hold on now!" interposed Luke, who sometimes had better judgment than Hiram. "It's all right. Don't get excited. It may have been a strike. The fellows haven't got on to all the points of the game yet this season. Go on."

"All right," growled Hiram. "But don't you dare strike out, Nat."

Joe's next delivery was called a ball, though it was rightly a strike. Joe said nothing, realizing that the umpire was naturally a bit afraid of offending Hiram and Luke too much. Then Nat

knocked a little pop fly, which was easily taken care of by the second baseman, and the first man on the regular, or school team, as it was called, was out.

"All ready for the next one!" called Catcher Bob.

"Don't you fan!" warned Hiram to Jake Weston, who was next up.

"Just watch me!" exulted Jake as he walked confidently to the plate.

Joe sent in a puzzling drop, with considerable swiftness, but to his chagrin Jake "killed" it, landing on it squarely and lining it out for two bags.

"That's the way to do it!" yelled Luke, capering about.

"Now, where's your star pitcher?" inquired Hiram, and he looked toward Tom Davis, who was playing first. "I guess he isn't so much!"

Tom said nothing. He realized that perhaps his advocacy of Joe's abilities had brought his friend and himself too much in the limelight. But he meant well.

"Oh, well, we just let you hit that one to see how it felt," shouted Bob Harrison, and that brought back Joe's nerve, which, for the moment, had deserted him as he saw his effort go for

naught. Jake was on second, but he only got one bag farther, stealing to third as Joe struck out the next man.

The school nine members were now whispering uneasily among themselves. Never before, at the opening of the season had they had a scrub pitcher who did such things to them. They realized that they had to play the game for all it was worth.

Luke and Hiram were whispering earnestly together and when Harry Lauter, whom Joe had struck out walked to the bench, Luke stepped up to the plate.

"Hold on!" cried Ward Gerard quickly. "You are out of your turn, Luke."

"How's that?" indignantly demanded the school captain.

"George Bland is up next, according to the batting order you gave me."

"Well, we've changed the batting order," put in Hiram quickly.

The truth of the matter was that George was not a very good hitter, while Luke was, and both the latter and the manager had seen the necessity of making at least one run the first inning in order to inspire confidence in the school team. They had hoped to change the batting order unobserved, and bring up a good hitter when he was most

needed. But the scrub captain had been too sharp for them.

"Changed the batting order, eh?" asked Ward. "You can't do it now under the rules."

"Oh, well, we ain't playing strictly according to rules yet," said Luke weakly. "I'm going to bat, anyhow. You can change your batting order if you like."

"We don't have to," responded Ward. "But go ahead, we'll allow it."

"Thanks—for nothing!" exclaimed Hiram sarcastically, and Luke held his place at home plate.

The situation was now rather tense. There were two men out, a man was on third and the captain of the school team himself was at bat. It was up to Luke to bring in his man and save his side from a goose egg in the first inning. Luke fairly glared at Joe, as if daring our hero to strike him out, and Joe was no less determined to do that feat if possible.

He looked at Bob for a signal, and got one that meant to deliver a swift in. Then Joe knew that Luke, for all his boasting was a bit afraid—afraid of being hit by the ball, and, being timid would involuntarily step back if the horsehide seemed to be coming too close to him.

"Here goes!" murmured Joe, and he sent in one with all his force.

As he had expected, the school captain did step back, and, an instant later, the umpire cried:

"Strike!"

"What?" fairly yelled Luke turning at him. There was a laugh from some of the scrubs, and it was joined in by a number of the other students—lads who were kept from the athletic committee by the snap ruling of Luke and Hiram. The captain realized that there was a feeling against him, and he quickly swallowed his wrath.

"Watch what you're doing," warned Hiram.

"Oh, that was only a fluke," declared Luke. Joe smiled. He was going to send in another "fluke," but not the same kind. He delivered a quick ball, with a peculiar upward twist to it, and, as Luke swung viciously at it, but too low, naturally his bat passed under the ball.

"Strike two!" yelled the umpire, as the ball landed safely in Bob's big mitt.

There was a murmur of astonishment from the school nine and its particular sympathizers, and a breath of delight from the despised scrubs. Hiram flushed angrily, yet he dared say nothing, for there was no doubt about this strike. As for

Luke, he was too surprised to make any comment.

"I'll get the next one!" he declared, as he tapped his bat on the home plate. He did hit it, but it was only a foul, and, being on the last strike, did not count against him.

"That's the way to do it. You're finding his curves if he has any!" cried Hiram. "Swat it!"

"Sure!" assented Luke.

With all his might he hit at the next ball, only to fan the air.

"Strike three—batter's out!" called the umpire amid a tense silence. Luke had done what he was seldom guilty of; he had struck out, and to a pitcher whom he not only hated but despised. Joe's great work had enabled the scrub to retire the school team without a run—a thing that had not been done at Excelsior in many years.

"Wow! That's the stuff!" yelled Tom, as he raced in from first. "I knew you could do it, Joe."

"Great work, old man!" complimented Ward. "Now we'll see what we can do."

There were gloomy and dubious looks on the faces of Hiram and Luke as the school team filed out on the field.

CHAPTER XIV

THE GAME AT MORNINGSIDE

INTEREST, especially for Joe, centered in what Frank Brown, the school pitcher, might do. So, as a matter of fact, was the attention of nearly all the players and spectators on him. For, to a large extent, the victories of the Excelsior team would depend on what their battery could do. Of course it was up to the other players to lend them support, but it was pretty well established that if the pitcher and catcher did well, support would not be lacking.

At the catching end of it Luke Fodick could be depended on nearly every time. But Frank Brown had yet to show what he could do as a twirler. In practice he had made out fairly well, but now the real test was to come.

Naturally he was a bit nervous as he walked to the box, to face his first opponent, none other than Ward Gerard, the scrub captain; and Ward was a good hitter. He managed to hit a two bagger.

Luke and Hiram cast anxious looks at each other. Well they knew how much depended on the showing their pitcher would make.

"Watch yourself, Frank," called Hiram—just the very advice to make poor Frank more nervous. But he braced up, struck out the next man, and managed to hold the succeeding one hitless.

The school nine was now about in the same position as the scrub had been. Their opponents had a man on third and two out. It was a time when Frank needed to brace up, and repeat Joe's trick. But he could not do it. Joe himself came to the bat, and with watchful eyes picked out just the ball he wanted after two strikes had been called on him. He rapped out as pretty a single as had been seen on the diamond in many a long day, and brought in Ward with the first run.

"Wow! Wow!" yelled the scrubs, capering about. "That's the way to do it!"

Luke and Hiram were almost in a panic. They saw the team they had so carefully built up in danger of disintegration; and holding a hasty conference, warning was sent to every school player to do his very best to get the scrub side out without another run.

Frank did it, for he struck out the next man, and Joe died at second. But the scrub had one

run and the school nine nothing. It was a poor beginning for Excelsior's chances at the Blue Banner when the players realized what a strong team Morningside had, and how efficient were the other nines in the league.

I am not going to describe that first school-scrub game in detail. I shall have other more important contests to tell you about, as the story goes on. Sufficient to say that after the ending of the first inning Hiram and Luke went at their lads in such a fierce spirit that there was a big improvement.

Joe kept up his good work in the box, but he had not yet "found" himself that season. He was not hardened enough; he lacked practice, and his arm soon gave out. Then, too the fielding of the scrubs was ragged, after Joe once began to be hit. The result was that the school nine began to pile up runs, and Hiram and Luke were jubilant.

"Now, where's your wonderful pitcher?" asked Luke of Ward.

"Oh, he's coming on. No use to work him too hard at first," replied the scrub captain good naturedly. "Look out for your own."

This advice was needed, for, after helping his team to get a good lead, Frank Brown also rather

went to pieces and when the game was over the school team led by only two runs.

"That's too close for comfort," observed Hiram to Luke, as they walked off the diamond. "Frank has got to do better than that."

"Oh, he'll be all right after a little more practice," spoke the captain.

"If he isn't Larry Akers will go in," warned the manager.

"Sure. Well, we've got lots of time before the first Morningside game. We'll win that."

"I hope we do," but Hiram's tone was not confident. Somehow he was worried over the way Joe Matson pitched.

As for our hero, he was warmly congratulated by his friends. Tom Davis was particularly enthusiastic.

"We'll have you in the box for the school nine before long," he predicted.

"I don't know," answered Joe rather dubiously. "It's a close combination between Hiram and Luke, and they may get Frank Brown into shape."

"Don't you believe it. He can't pitch as good as you in a thousand years."

"That's right," chimed in Teeter.

"Nothing like having good friends," remarked Joe laughingly.

Now that the season was started the baseball practice went on with a vim. Luke and Hiram had some of their players out every day, batting or catching the ball. Others were sent around the track to improve their wind, and in the gymnasium others were set at work on the various machines, as Dr. Rudden found their weak spots.

The school nine battled against the scrub, too, and though Joe improved in his pitching so did the members of the first team in their batting, so that there were no other contests as close as the first one.

The time for the first Morningside game was approaching. It was the first regular contest of the season and as such was always quite an affair. This time it was to be played on the Morningside diamond, and Luke and Hiram were bending every effort to win the game.

The nine picked to play was practically the same as the one that played the first game against the scrub. There had been some shifts, and then shifts back again, and under the urging of the coach, the captain and the manager, the lads had improved very much.

The day of the first game came. In special cars or in stage coaches, for those who preferred that method of locomotion, while some of the

more wealthy lads hired autos, the nine and its supporters made their way to Morningside. Hiram, Luke and a few of their cronies went in a big touring car that Spencer Trusdell, a millionaire's son, owned.

"Some class to them," remarked Joe, as he and Tom with a squad of the scrub and substitutes, got aboard a trolley car.

"They may have to walk back," predicted Tommy Barton, one of the scrub.

"Why?" asked Joe.

"Spencer may not have money enough left to buy gasoline. He's a sport, you know, and always betting."

"Well, he'll bet on his own nine; won't he?"

"Oh, yes—but——" and Tommy paused significantly.

"You don't mean to say you think Morningside will win, do you?" asked Ward Gerard. "You old traitor, you!"

"I shouldn't be surprised to see our side licked," replied Tommy calmly. "They're soft, and Morningside has already played one game with Trinity and trimmed them."

And as Joe and Tom journeyed to the grounds they heard others say the same thing. Neverthe-

less, Luke, Hiram and their own particular crowd were very confident.

There was a big attendance at the game. The stands were filled with a rustling, yelling, cheering and vari-colored throng—the colors being supplied by scores of pretty girls, whose brothers, or whose friends, played on either nine.

“Jove! What wouldn’t I give to be booked to pitch to-day!” exclaimed Joe, as he and Tom found their seats, for neither was on the list of substitutes.

“I know how you feel, old man,” sympathized Tom. “But just hang on, and things may come your way.”

“Play ball!” cried the umpire, and the first big game of the season for Excelsior Hall was underway.

That contest is still talked about in the annals of the two schools. It started off well, and Excelsior, first to the bat, rapped out two runs before the side was retired. Then came the first real intimation that the opponents of Morningside were weak in several places, notably in the pitching box, and in fielding and stick-work.

Frank Brown, after striking out two men in succession, and giving the impression to his mates that he was going to make good, and to his rivals

that they had a strong boxman to fight against—Frank, I say, literally went up in the air.

He was not used to being hooted at and jeered, and this is just what the Morningsideites did to him to get his "goat." They got it, for before the first inning closed he had been unmercifully pounded, and four runs were chalked up to the credit of the foes of Excelsior Hall.

Still that score might not have been so bad had Hiram and Luke kept their heads. They changed their batting order, put in some substitutes, and Hiram used strong language to Frank.

"You've got to do better!" insisted the bullying manager. This had the further effect of getting on Frank's nerves, and he did worse than ever.

"Say, why don't you fellows get a real pitcher?" asked Halsted Hart, manager of the Morningsides.

"This is too easy," added Ted Clay, the opposing pitcher with a laugh.

In desperation Luke finally sent in Larry Akers to pitch. At first he tightened up and stopped the winning streak of Morningside, and then, he, too, fell by the wayside, and the hooting, yelling crowd had his "Angora," as Peaches dolefully remarked.

It might be said in passing that both Peaches

and Teeter did well, and George Bland not quite so well. But the rest of the Excelsior team made many errors. Even Luke was not exempt, and this had the further effect of worrying his players.

It is no pleasure to write of that first game, and that is why I have not gone into details about it, for Excelsior Hall is a school dear to my heart, and I do not like to chronicle her defeats.

When the ninth inning came the score stood fourteen to six. In desperation, Luke had sent in Ned Turton to replace Larry. Several of his own friends asked him to give Joe a chance, but neither he nor Hiram would listen. In fact, there was a disagreement between Hiram and Luke. The manager wanted to shift Peaches back to first base but Luke would not hear of it until Hiram threatened to resign as manager, and that so alarmed the captain that he let him have his way.

That settled matters, not because Peaches went to first, though he did good service there, but it was too late to stem the losing tide. The Excelsior team could not get a run in their share of the ninth, and Morningside did not take the trouble to finish out, the final score being fourteen to six in their favor. The opponents of Excelsior had snowed them under.

CHAPTER XV

A STRANGE DISCOVERY

"THREE cheers for Excelsior Hall!" cried Captain Elmer Dalton of the Morningside team. "All ready boys, with a will!"

The cheers were deafening and perhaps they were all the more hearty because it was the winning nine and its supporters who were giving them.

The crowd swarmed over the diamond, players and spectators mingling. Everybody was talking at once, the losing side and their supporters trying to explain how the defeat had come about, and the victors exulting in their victory.

"I don't see what's the matter with you fellows, anyhow," growled Hiram, as he strode over and joined the little group of disconsolate ones who were walking toward the dressing room. "You ought to have beaten 'em."

"And so we would have if they'd given me decent support," broke in Luke. "There were too many changes on the team."

"And I suppose you think I'm responsible for that," retorted Hiram quickly.

"I didn't say so. One thing, though; there's got to be another change."

"That's right," added the manager scowling at the team, but neither he nor Luke intimated where the change ought to be made.

"They're right on that one point," said Peaches, "a big shift is needed, and I can tell 'em one piece to make it, if not two."

"Where?" asked Teeter.

"Pitcher for one," replied Peaches quickly, "and catcher for the other. If we had two good men as a battery there would have been a different story to-day."

"What's that?" quickly demanded Hiram, turning around, for Peaches had unconsciously spoken louder than he intended.

"I said I agreed with you," spoke the lad diplomatically, "that if we'd had some changes the result would have been different to-day," but he did not mention the changes.

"Well, it's all over," remarked Joe to Tom, as they descended from the grandstand. "Let's get back home. Jove! But it's too bad to start the season with a defeat."

"Somebody had to lose," replied Tom philo-

sophically. "We couldn't both win, and I didn't expect it would turn out much different when I heard the talk on the way to the game. But it will teach Luke and Hiram a lesson."

"If they want to learn it—yes."

"Oh, don't worry. They'll be only too anxious, after to-day. But I notice some of the Trinity Hall and Lakeview Prep. players here. Getting a line on us, I guess."

"Shouldn't wonder. We play Trinity next week."

"Well, we ought to win that game. Hurry up, Joe, and we can get the next trolley back. No autos for us."

As the two chums hurried across the diamond they found themselves in the midst of a crowd of Morningside players and students. At the sight of one lad in the uniform of Morningside, a uniform not soiled by the dust and grime of the diamond, Tom plucked Joe by the sleeve.

"For the love of Mike, look there!" exclaimed the former first baseman of the Silver Stars.

"Where?" asked Joe, and Tom pointed to the player in the spick and span new uniform.

"Sam Morton!" gasped Joe, as he recognized his former rival on the Stars and his sometime enemy. "Sam Morton! What's he doing here?"

"Looks as if he was on the nine," replied Tom. "He's in one of the Morningside uniforms, but he didn't take part in the game."

"Sam Morton here!" went on Joe, wonderingly. "It doesn't seem possible. I wonder why we didn't hear something about it? It sure is he, and yet——"

"Wait, I'll ask some one," volunteered Tom, and tapping on the shoulder a Morningside player near him, he asked: "Is he one of your nine?" Tom pointed to Sam Morton, who had not yet observed our heroes.

"What? Oh, yes; he's a newcomer here I believe, but he had quite a reputation, so Captain Dalton put him on as substitute pitcher."

"Substitute pitcher!" gasped Joe.

"Yes, he's rather good I believe. He hasn't had much practice with us as yet or we'd have played him part of the time against you fellows to-day. Why, do you know him?"

"Yes. He used to be on the same town team with me," replied Joe.

"He'll probably play next week," went on the Morningside lad, "and when we meet you fellows again he'll probably do what Ted Clay did to-day," and he grinned cheerfully—there is nothing like a cheerful enemy.

"Sam Morton here," murmured Joe, as if unable to believe it, while his old enemy strode on without having seen him, and the Morningside lad, who had given them the information swung about on his way to the dressing rooms.

"Say, that's going some!" exclaimed Joe, as he and Tom walked on. "Fancy meeting Sam Morton here. I didn't hear that he was going to boarding school."

"Neither did I. He must have made up his mind lately. Probably he began right after the Easter vacation. I didn't spot him at the time of the banner parade.

"Me, either. But there was such a mob of fellows that it was hard to find anyone. But if he's here and he makes good, and pitches in some of the games, and if——"

"If you get the chance to pitch for the school nine, you and Sam may fight your old battles over again," finished Tom.

"That's right," agreed Joe.

It was a discouraged, disgruntled and altogether unhappy crowd of lads that returned to Excelsior Hall late that afternoon. Despondency perched like a bird of ill-omen on the big flagstaff; and a celebration that some of the lads had arranged for, in case of a victory, did not come off.

Tom and Joe were seated in their room, talking over various matters, including the game of the day, when there came the usual signal on their door, indicating that a friend stood without.

"That's Teeter," predicted Tom.

"Peaches," was Joe's guess, but when he swung open the portal both lads stood there. On their faces were looks of suppressed excitement.

"What's up?" demanded Joe.

"Lots. Special meeting of the athletic committee called. In the gym. Come on!" panted Peaches.

"We're going to protest against the way Hiram manages the team!" added Teeter.

"Come on!" urged Peaches, recovering his breath. "We want you with us. There's a lot of feeling against Hiram and Luke. They practically lost the game for us to-day. The revolt is spreading. It's a chance for you, Joe. Come on."

"There's going to be a hot time!" predicted Teeter. "We have permission to hold a meeting. All the fellows are coming. Get a move on."

Joe and Tom grabbed up their caps and hurried after their chums, Joe with a wildly-beating heart. Had his chance come?

CHAPTER XVI

A HOT MEETING

"THE meeting will come to order!"

Teeter was in the chair, looking over a talking, shifting, excited crowd of lads gathered in the school gymnasium. He had assumed the office, and no one had disputed him.

"The meeting will come to order!" he cried again.

"Order! Order!" begged George Bland and Peaches. "We can't do anything like this."

"What are we going to do?" asked Tommy Barton.

"Try and fix things so we can win ball games," answered Tom Davis.

Joe did not say much. He realized that this was, in a measure, a meeting to aid him, and he felt it would be best to keep quiet. His friends were looking out for his interests.

"Order! Order!" begged Teeter again, and after many repetitions, and bangings of his gavel,

he succeeded in producing some semblance of quietness.

"You all know what we're here for," went on Teeter.

"No, we don't; tell us!" shouted some one.

"We're here in the first place to make a protest against the way Hiram Shell and Luke Fodick managed the baseball team to-day," went on Teeter, "and then we'll consider what can be done to make things better. We ought to have won against Morningside to-day, and——"

"That's the stuff!"

"That's the way to talk!"

"Hit 'em again!"

These were a few of the cries that greeted Teeter's announcement. He was very much in earnest.

"This isn't a regular session of the athletic committee at all," he resumed. "It's a protest meeting, and it's going to be sort of free and easy. Any fellow that wants to can speak his mind. I take it you all agree with me that we ought to do something."

"That's right!" came in a chorus.

"And we ought to protest against Hiram's high-handed method. What about that?"

"That's right, too," responded several. Joe

looked over the crowd. As far as he could see it was composed in the main of lads who were only probationary members of the school society—lads without voting power.

Neither Hiram nor Luke was present, and Joe could not see any of their particular crowd. He was mistaken in thinking that Hiram had no friends there, however, for no sooner had Teeter asked the last question than Jake Weston arose and asked in rather sneering tones:

“Do you call this giving a fellow a square deal?”

“What do you mean?” inquired Teeter. The room was quiet enough now.

“I mean just this,” went on the lad who was perhaps the closest of all on the nine to Hiram save Luke. “I mean that Hiram Shell isn’t here to defend himself, and you’re saying all sorts of mean things against him.”

“We intend to have him here—if he’ll come,” spoke Teeter significantly. “Luke, too. We want them to hear what we say about them.”

“You’re trying to disrupt the team!” yelled Jake, who had lost his temper.

“I am not! I’m trying to do anything to better the team. We ought to have won that game to-day, and you know it.”

"I know that I played my best!" shouted Jake, "and if you accuse me of——"

"Nobody's accusing you," put in Peaches.

Several lads were on their feet, all seeking to be heard. Teeter was vainly rapping with his gavel. It looked for a few moments as if there would be several fights, for lads were shaking their fists in each other's faces.

"Why don't you give Hiram a show?" demanded Jake. "Let him know this meeting is being held."

"I sent word to him, but he didn't come," called Teeter, above the din.

"Well, he's here now!" interrupted a sudden voice, and Hiram Shell fairly jumped into the room, followed by Luke and a score of their particular friends. "I just heard of this snap session, and I want to know what it's about. How dare you fellows hold a meeting of the athletic committee when I didn't call it?"

"Say, you drop that kind of talk!" fairly yelled Teeter. "This isn't a meeting of the athletic committee!"

"Come on down off that platform!" demanded the bully striding toward the chairman *pro tem*. "What right have you got there?"

"Just as much right as you have, and I'm going

to stick! This is just a meeting of the fellows of Excelsior Hall, and I've got just as much right to preside as you have."

Perhaps it was the gavel which Teeter clenched in his hand, perhaps it was the fearless manner in which he faced Hiram, or perhaps it was the way in which Joe, Tom, Peaches and several of the larger students crowded up around Teeter, like a bodyguard, that caused Hiram to pause in his progress toward the chairman.

Whatever it was, it proved effective and probably prevented a serious clash, for Hiram was in the mood to have struck Teeter, who surely would have retaliated.

"Well, what's it all about?" asked the bully, after a pause. "What do you fellows want, anyhow?"

"We want the ball team managed differently," retorted Teeter.

"That's right!" came from a score of ringing voices.

Hiram turned a bit pale. It was the first time he had ever witnessed an organized revolt against his authority.

"Aren't you fellows satisfied with the way I manage things?" the bully sneered.

"No, and not with the way Luke Fodick cap-

tains the team," went on the now fully aroused Teeter. "There's got to be a change."

"Aw, you're sore because some of your friends can't play!" cut in Jake Weston.

"Not at all," spoke Teeter. "Everyone knows we should have won to-day, and what a miserable exhibition of baseball we gave! It was rotten, and we want to protest. We're willing to let you continue as manager, Hiram, and have Luke for captain, only we fellows want to have more of a say in how the team is run."

"Why, you fellows haven't any rights!" cried Hiram. "A lot of you are only probationary members, anyhow, and can't vote."

"They don't need to vote," declared Teeter. "It isn't a question of voting. We're students at Excelsior—all of us—and we have a right to say what we think. We think things ought to be done differently."

"That's right—we're with him," was shouted in such a volume of energy that it clearly showed to Hiram that, even though he held the balance of power in the committee proper, yet he did not in the whole school, and it was to the whole school that the team would have to look for support. It was a crisis in the affairs of Excelsior Hall.

CHAPTER XVII

THE INITIATION

FOR a moment after the unexpected support of Teeter's ultimatum to Hiram there was a tense silence. The lads who had come in with the bully—his supporting army so to speak—remained grouped around him and Luke. On the other side stood Teeter, Peaches, Tom, Joe and their friends, and a number of the better players of the school nine. Included among them were a number of the substitutes.

Hiram Shell looked around him. He must have been aware that his power might slip very easily from him now, unless something was done. It was no time to pursue his usual tactics. He must temporize, but he made up his mind that those who had revolted from his authority would pay dearly for it sooner or later.

"Well, what do you fellows want?" he fairly growled.

"I'll tell you what we want," said Teeter firm-

ly. "In the first place we want this business of shifting players all about, stopped. A fellow gets used to playing in one position and he's best there. Then you or Luke change him."

"Well, hasn't the captain the right to do that?" demanded Luke.

"Sure, yes," spoke Peaches, "but when you get a good lad in a good place keep him there."

"Is that all?" sneered Hiram.

"No, we think there ought to be better pitching," went on the self-constituted chairman.

"Ha! I guess that's where the whole trouble is!" cried Hiram quickly. "This meeting is for the benefit of Joe Matson."

"Nothing of the sort!" exclaimed Joe quickly. "I knew nothing about it until Teeter told me. Of course I'd like to pitch; there's no use denying that, but I don't want any fellow to give way for me if he's making good."

"That's the trouble—he isn't," put in Teeter.

Hiram took a quick resolve. He could smooth matters over now, and later arrange them to suit himself and Luke. So he said:

"All right, I admit that we didn't make a very good showing to-day. But it was our first game, and Brown and Akers didn't do very well in the box. But don't be too hasty. Now I'll tell you

what I'll do," and he acted as though it was a big favor. "I'll let you fellows have a voice when I make changes after this. We'll do some harder practice. I'll make Brown and Akers pitch better——"

"I don't believe he can," murmured Tom.

"We won't make any more shifts—right away," went on Hiram. "Maybe you fellows were right. I haven't given as much time to the team as I should. But wait—we'll win the Blue Banner yet."

"That's all we ask," said Teeter. "We just wanted you to know how we felt about it, and if things are better and our nine can win, we won't say another word."

"All right, let it go at that," and Hiram affected to laugh, but there was not much mirth in it. "Might as well quit now, I guess. Everybody out for hard practice next week. I want to see some better stick-work, and as for pitching—where are Brown and Akers?"

"Here!" cried the two boxmen.

"You fellows will have to brush up a bit on your speed and curves," went on the bully manager. "Isn't that right, Luke?"

"Sure," grunted the captain. There was more talk, but it was not of the fiery kind and, for the

time, at least, the threatened disruption had passed. But there was still an undercurrent of dissatisfaction against Luke and Hiram.

"Well, I don't see as it did an awful lot of good," remarked Tom Davis to Peaches and Teeter, as they walked out of the gynasium with Joe, a little later. "I don't see that Joe is benefitted."

"I didn't expect much," spoke our hero. "It was well meant and——"

"And it did good, too," interrupted Teeter. "It's the first time any one ever talked to Hiram like a Dutch Uncle, and I guess it sort of jarred him. He'll sit up and take notice now, and it will be for the good of the team."

"But where does Joe come in?" asked Peaches.

"Well, I figure it out this way," replied Teeter. "Brown and Akers will try to make good but they can't. The fellows will see that we've got to have a new pitcher, and Hiram will have to give 'em one. Then Joe will step in."

"There are others as good as I in the school," remarked Joe modestly.

"Well, they haven't shown themselves if there are," was Teeter's retort. "No, Joe will be pitching before the season is over, you see if he isn't."

The question was discussed pro and con, as they went to their rooms, and continued after they got there until a monitor warned them that though permission had been given to hold a meeting it did not extend to midnight lunch.

It was one night, after a hard day on the diamond, that Joe and Tom, who were studying, or making a pretense at it, heard the usual knock on their door.

"Teeter and Peaches—I wonder what's up now?" asked Tom.

"Let 'em in and they'll tell us," suggested Joe, as his roommate went to the door. It was kept locked, for often some of the fun-loving students would come in unannounced to create a "rough-house," to the misery of the two chums.

As the portal swung back, there was revealed to Joe and Tom several sheet-clad white figures, each one with a mask of black cloth over his head. The sight was rather a wierd one, and for the moment Tom was nonplussed.

"Shut the door" commanded Joe quickly. "They're up to some high jinks!"

Tom hesitated for a moment. If it was Peaches, Teeter and their friends, he did not want to shut them out, but, on the contrary might want to join the fun. If, on the contrary, it was a hostile crowd

there was no use getting into trouble. So Tom hesitated and was lost.

For a moment later, the throng of white-clad and unrecognizable figures (because of the masks) stepped into the room.

"We have come," announced one in a voice that sounded hollow and deep, "to initiate you into the Mystic and Sacred Order of the Choo-Choo!"

"Get out, Peaches, I know your voice," said Joe, not quite sure whether he did or not.

"Prepare to join the Mystic and Sacred Order of the Choo-Choo! Shall he not, comrades?" demanded a second figure.

"Toot! Toot! He shall!" was the answer in a chorus.

"That's Teeter all right," affirmed Tom.

"Come!" commanded the first figure, advancing to take hold of Tom's arm.

"Shall we go, Joe?" asked his chum.

Joe thought a minute. There had been rumors in the school of late, that several initiations had been held into a newly-formed society. Reports differed as to what society it was, some lads stating that they had been made to join one and some another. But all agreed, though they did not go into particulars, that the initiations were anything but pleasant. Joe was as fond of fun as anyone

but he did not like being mistreated—especially when it was not by his friends.

“Don’t go!” he called suddenly to Tom.

“Then we’ll make you!” said the disguised voice. “Grab ’em fellows!”

Instantly there was a commotion in the room. Joe leaped back to get behind a sofa, but one of the black-masked figures was too quick for him and seized him around the neck. Our hero tried to tear the mask from the face to see who his assailant was, but other hands clasped his arms from behind and he was helpless.

Tom, too, was having his own troubles. He was beset by two of the unknowns and held in such a way that he could do nothing. The struggle though sharp was a quiet one, for the students did not want to attract the attention of a monitor or prowling professor.

“’Tis well,” spoke the lad who was evidently the leader, when Tom and Joe were held safely, their hands having been tied behind their backs. “Away with them to the dungeon deep, and they will soon be good, faithful and true members of the Mystic and Sacred Order of the Choo-Choo!”

Then, realizing that discretion was probably now the better part of valor, Joe and Tom meekly followed their captors.

CHAPTER XVIII

“ FIRE ! ”

“ WHERE are you fellows taking us ? ” demanded Joe, as they walked softly down the corridor.

“ Toot-Toot ! ” was all the answer he received.

“ Say, we don’t mind having fun,” added Tom, “ but if you fellows are going to cut up any, we want to know it.”

“ Toot-Toot ! ” came again in imitation of a whistle. It was evident that this was a sort of signal or watchword among the members of the Order of Choo-Choo.

“ These aren’t Peaches, Teeter, and our fellows,” spoke Joe into Tom’s ear as they were forced to descend a back and seldom used staircase.

“ That’s right,” agreed Tom. “ I wonder who they are ? ”

“ Some of the seniors, maybe,” suggested the young pitcher. “ I wish I knew where they are taking us.”

“ The candidates who are about to be ini-

tiated into the Mystic and Sacred Order of the Choo-Choo will kindly keep quiet!" came the quick command from the leader. "Silence is imperative to have the spell work."

"Oh, you dry up!" retorted Joe.

"Silence!" came the command again, emphasized this time by a dig in the ribs.

"You quit——" began our hero, but his voice ended in a grunt, for some one had hit him in the stomach, knocking the wind out of him. He was indignant, and had half a mind to make a fight for it then and there. But he was practically helpless, and was descending a flight of stairs which made it dangerous to chance a scuffle. He made up his mind to fight when the time came.

"If you fellows——" began Tom.

"Silence over there!" hissed one of the white-robed figures. "If they talk any more, Master of Ceremonies, gag 'em."

"Right, Chief Engineer," was the hollow answer.

Tom thought it best to keep quiet. Silently the little crowd advanced. They halted at the door of one of the many store-rooms in the basement of the largest of the school dormitories. One of the lads opened the portals with a key. It was as black as pitch beyond.

" Enter, timid and shrinking candidates," commanded some one. " Enter into the sacred precincts of the Choo-Choo."

" Not much I won't! " declared Joe. " I can't see my hand before my face, and I'm not going into a dark room, not knowing what is there."

" Me either! " declared Tom.

" It is so ordered," came the deep voice of the leader. " Enter or be thrown in! "

Joe turned, trying in vain to pierce the disguise of the black mask. He struggled to free his arms from the rope that bound them, but could not. He was half-minded to strike out with his feet, but he was now so surrounded by the initiators that he could not. Besides, if he did that he might lose his balance and fall hard. Tom was in like straits.

" Forward, march! " came the command.

" I'm not going in I tell you! " insisted Joe.

" If he doesn't go in, shove him," came the command.

Joe, as he felt that resistance was useless, started forward. It was better to keep his own footing, if he had to go in the room and not run the risk of being shoved down.

Advancing cautiously, followed by Tom, the young pitcher stepped over the threshold. Almost

instantly he felt cold water spurting up around his ankles, and he sought to draw back. He did not want to fall into a deep tank, with his arms bound.

"Go on! Go on in!" was the command and he felt himself being shoved from behind. There was no help for it, but to his relief he found, as he advanced, that the water did not come higher than his knees.

"Great Scott! What are we up against?" asked Tom.

"Search me," responded Joe.

"Silence! Blindfold 'em!" came a command, and before they could have prevented it, had they been able, Joe's and Tom's eyes were covered with big handkerchiefs.

"Keep on!" was the order again, and the candidates did, soon stepping out of the water upon the solid floor.

"Tie their feet," was the next order, and this was done. "Now, candidates," spoke the leader, "you have crossed the river of blood and the first part of your journey is over. But, to be good and loyal members of the Mystic and Sacred Order of Choo-Choo, it is necessary that you make a noise like a locomotive. Go ahead now, puff!"

For a moment Joe and Tom hesitated and then, absurd as it was, they entered into the spirit of

the affair and gave as good an imitation as possible of a steam locomotive in operation.

" Very good! Very good," was the comment. " Now go up grade," and the blindfolded candidates were forced to go up a steep incline of boards, slipping and sliding back half the time.

" They are coming on," commented some one. " At the next stop they take water. Hose-tender, get ready! "

" Hold on! What are you going to do? " demanded Joe.

" You'll see," was the answer. Joe and Tom were led to another part of the room. It was dimly lighted now, as they could see, for a faint glow came under the handkerchiefs.

A moment later each of the luckless candidates felt a cold stream of water strike him full in the face. They tried to duck, and to turn their heads away, but the others held them until the upper part of their bodies were thoroughly soaked.

" That's enough for steam," came the order from one of the party. " Now to see how they can carry passengers. Off with their bonds, but keep the blinders on."

This was done.

" Down on your hands and knees, candidates,"

came the order, and Joe and Tom had nothing for it but to obey.

A moment later some one sat on each back and again came the order:

“Forward march!”

Now Joe, while liking fun as well as any lad, thought there was a limit to it, and to the indignities of the initiation, especially in a mythical society which they did not care about joining. When a heavy lad, therefore, sat down on our hero's back Joe made up his mind that matters had gone far enough.

“Go ahead! Carry your passenger!” was the command.

“Not by a jugful!” cried Joe, and with a quick motion he stood up, spilling off the lad on his back. The latter hit the floor with a resounding whack. The next instant Joe had torn off the blinding handkerchief, and made a grab for the lad whom he had upset. He tore off his mask and there was revealed the scowling face of Hiram Shell.

At the same moment Tom had done the same to his tormentor, discovering Luke Fodick under the black mask.

“Oh, so it's your crowd, is it Hiram?” asked Joe.

" Yes ,and by Jove, you'll suffer for this! Why aren't you sports enough to take your initiation as the others do?"

" Because we don't choose to," replied our hero.

" Then I'll make you! " cried Hiram, doubling up his fists and leaping at Joe. " Come on, Luke, give 'em what's coming to 'em! "

" Two can play at that game," spoke Joe coolly. He noted that the room had been roughly fitted up as a sort of society meeting chamber. At the entrance was a long, narrow and shallow tank of water. It was through this that Joe and Tom had waded.

" I'll fix you! " cried Hiram.

" All right," agreed Joe easily. " As well here and now as anywhere, anytime."

He threw himself into a position of defense as Hiram came on. Luke was advancing toward Tom, while the others, still wearing their masks, looked on in anticipation.

There might have been two stiff fights the next moment had there not suddenly sounded from without a series of startled cries. Then came the clanging of bells, and above the riot of noise the lads heard some one shouting:

" Fire! Fire! Fire! "

CHAPTER XIX

A THRILLING RESCUE

"WHAT's that?" asked half a dozen of the white-robed lads.

"Fire, somewhere," answered Hiram, pausing in his rush toward Joe.

"Come on, this can wait," added one of his companions. "We're through with this initiation, anyhow."

"But I'm not through with him," snapped the bully with a glance of anger at the young pitcher. "I'll settle with him later."

"Fire! Fire!"

Again the cries rang out on the night air.

"The school must be on fire!" yelled Luke Fodick. "Come on, fellows!"

"Fire! Fire!"

Many voices now took up the cry outside, and through a partially-curtained window could be seen the dancing light of flames.

"Come on!" cried Joe to Tom. "We've got to be in on this, whatever it is!"

"Surest thing you know," agreed his chum.

They rushed from the room, following after Hiram and Luke. The others straggled out as fast as they disrobed, for they did not want to be seen in their regalia by any of the school authorities who might be on hand after the alarm of fire.

"I hope it isn't any of the school buildings!" exclaimed Joe as he and Tom raced along.

"That's right. So do I. Look, you can see the reflection from here."

The boys were opposite a window in the corridor, and over the roof and spire of the school chapel could be seen a lurid glare in the sky, but what was burning could not be made out.

"It's the gym!" gasped Tom.

"Don't you dare say that!" cried Joe, "and with the baseball season just starting."

"Well, it looks like it anyhow."

Together they raced on until they came to a door that gave egress to the campus. Students were pouring out from their rooms in all directions, some eagerly questioning, and others joining in the cries of "Fire!" No one seemed to know where the blaze was.

Professor Rodd came out with his precious tall hat in one hand and a bundle of books in the other.

"Is the school doomed, boys?" he asked.

"How did it start? Have I time to save anything else? I have some Latin books——"

"I don't know where it is, Professor," answered Joe. "But it isn't this building, anyhow."

"Good! I'm glad of it. I mean I'm sorry it's anywhere. Wait, and I'll be with you to help fight the flames."

He ran back to his quarters to return quickly minus his silk hat and the books, and he wore an old fashioned night-cap.

"There now, I'm ready," he announced, and he ran on as though he had donned a modern smoke helmet, used by the firemen. The boys laughed, serious and exciting as the situation was.

Dr. Rudden saw our two friends hurrying across the campus together.

"Why, boys!" cried the coach and athletic director. "You're all wet! How did it happen? Have you been playing the hose on the fire? Did it burst?"

"No, we haven't been to the blaze yet," answered Joe. "We had——"

"A sort of accident," finished Tom, as his chum hesitated for the right explanation. Then they avoided further conversation by racing toward the blaze, the light of which was becoming every minute more glaring.

A stream of students and teachers was now hurrying across the campus, heading for the path around the chapel, which building hid the fire from sight. As Tom and Joe turned the corner they saw at a glance what was burning.

It was an old disused factory about half a mile from the school, a building pretty much in ruins and of little value save as a sleeping place for tramps. Several times in the past there had been slight fires there but they had been quickly extinguished, though many said it would have been as well to let the old structure burn down.

This time it seemed as if this would happen. The factory was of wood, and there had been no rain recently, so it was quite dry, and there was a brisk wind to fan the flames.

"I guess it's a goner," panted Tom.

"Looks that way," agreed his chum.

"Here comes the fire department," went on the other, as they heard the clanging of a bell down the road. A little later they could see, by the glare of the fire, a crowd of village men and boys dragging, by the long rope attached to it, a combined chemical engine, and hook and ladder vehicle. It was a new acquisition in the town of Cedarhurst, and the citizens were very proud of it, though they had no horses to pull it. But every-

one who could do so grabbed hold of the long rope.

"They're making good time," commented Joe.

"But they might as well save themselves. The old factory is better burned than standing. Guess some more tramps went in there."

"Then they'd better be getting out by now," observed the young pitcher, "for it must be pretty hot."

The lads ran on, and soon found themselves close to the burning structure. The heat of the flames could be felt, and Tom and Joe moved back into the crowd that had gathered. Up clattered the fire apparatus, and there was the usual excitement, with everyone giving orders, and telling how it ought to be done.

Finally a chemical stream was turned on, the whitish foaming mixture of bicarbonate of soda, sulphuric acid and water spurting upon the flames. There was a hiss, and the part of the fire that was sprayed quickly died out.

But it was evident that several chemical streams would be needed if the fire was to be completely extinguished, whereas two lines of hose were all that were available. In fact nothing but a smothering deluge of water would have been effective, and this was not obtainable.

"They'll never get that fire out!" cried a man in the crowd. "Why don't you let it burn, Chief?"

"Because we're here to put out fires. I'm going to——"

But what the chief was going to do he never said, for at that moment, above the crackling of the fire and the shouts of the men and boys, there arose an agonized shout.

"Help! Help! Save me!"

All eyes turned instinctively upward, and there, perched on the ledge of what had once been the clock tower of the factory, high above the roaring, crackling flames, stood a man, wildly waving his arms and crying:

"Help! Help! Save me!"

"Look! A man! He'll be burned to death!" yelled a score of persons as they saw the danger.

"That's about right, unless he gets down pretty soon," shouted Tom into Joe's ear. "Why doesn't he go down?"

"Probably because the stairs are burned away," was Joe's shouted answer—everyone was shouting, partly to make themselves heard and partly because of the excitement, which was contagious.

"Help! Help!" cried the man again. He gave

one look below him and crowded closer to the outer edge of the tower.

"Look out! Don't jump!" someone cried.

"We'll save you!" shouted the chief. "Get the ladder, boys! Lively now!"

Scores of willing ones raced to the wagon and began pulling out the ladders. They were the extension kind, and could be made quite long. Several men ran with one toward the building.

"Not that side! The flames are too hot! You can't raise it there!" cried the chief. "Try around back!"

The men obeyed but a moment later there came a disappointing shout:

"Too short! The ladder's too short! Get a longer one!"

"That's the longest we've got!" answered the chief.

"Then splice two together!" urged some one, but the suggestion could hardly have been carried out with safety. No one knew what to do. The flames were mounting higher and higher, bursting out on all sides now, so that in a few moments, even had there been a ladder long enough to reach to the man, it could not have been raised against the building.

"Help! Help!" continued to call the seemingly-

doomed one. He moved still nearer to the edge of the tower.

"Don't jump! Don't!" yelled the crowd. "You'll be killed!"

"He might just as well be killed by the fall as burned to death," remarked one man grimly. "In fact I'd prefer it."

"Can't someone do something?" begged a woman hysterically.

The man held out his hands appealingly.

"Oh, if we only had an airship, we could rescue him!" murmured Tom.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Joe. "I have an idea. If I could only get a rope up to him he could slide down it, if we held the outer end away from the fire—a slanting cable you know."

"That's it!" yelled his chum.

"How are you going to get a rope up to him?" asked Luke Fodick, who was standing beside our hero. "No one could throw a rope up there."

"No, perhaps not a rope," admitted Joe, "but if I could throw a string we could tie the rope to the string and he could haul it up and fasten it."

"But you can't even throw a string up there," insisted Luke.

"Of course not!" added Hiram, who had joined his crony. "Nobody could."

"Yes they can—I can!" cried Joe. "I'll throw up this ball of cord. It will unwind on the way up if I keep hold of one end of it," and he pulled from his pocket a ball of light but strong cord. Joe used it to wind around split bats. "I'm going to throw this," cried the young pitcher. "Hey there!" he yelled to the man on the tower. "Catch this as it comes, and pull up the rope we're going to fasten on!"

The man waved his hands helplessly. He could not hear.

"Where you going to get the rope?" asked Tom.

"Off the fire apparatus, of course. It's long and strong. Tom, you go get the rope off; I've got to make the man hear and understand before I can throw the cord."

"That's the stuff! The rope from the engine!" cried the man near Joe. "That's the idea, young fellow!"

Accompanied by Tom, the man raced to the engine. He quickly explained what the plan of rescue was, and others aided in taking from the reel the long rope by which the apparatus was pulled. Once more Joe shouted his instructions, while the fire raged and crackled and the crowd yelled.

"Quiet! Quiet!" begged Joe. "I've got to make him hear!"

"Make a megaphone—here's a newspaper," suggested a man. He quickly rolled it into a cone, tore off the small end to make a mouthpiece and Joe had an improvised megaphone. Through it he begged the crowd to keep silent, and at last they heard and understood.

"I'm going to throw you a ball of cord!" called Joe through the paper cone to the man on the tower. "Catch it, and when I yell again, pull up the rope. Fasten it to the tower and we'll hold the ground end out and away from the flames. Then slide down."

The man waved his hands to show that he understood. Then Joe got ready to throw up the cord.

"He can't do it! He'll never be able to get that ball up to the man. It will fall short or go into the flames," said Luke Fodick.

"He can't, eh?" asked Tom, who came back, helping to pull the long rope. "You don't know how Joe Matson can throw. Just watch him."

And, amid a silence that was painfully tense, the young pitcher got ready to deliver a ball on which more depended than on any other he had ever thrown in all his life.

CHAPTER XX

THE WARNING

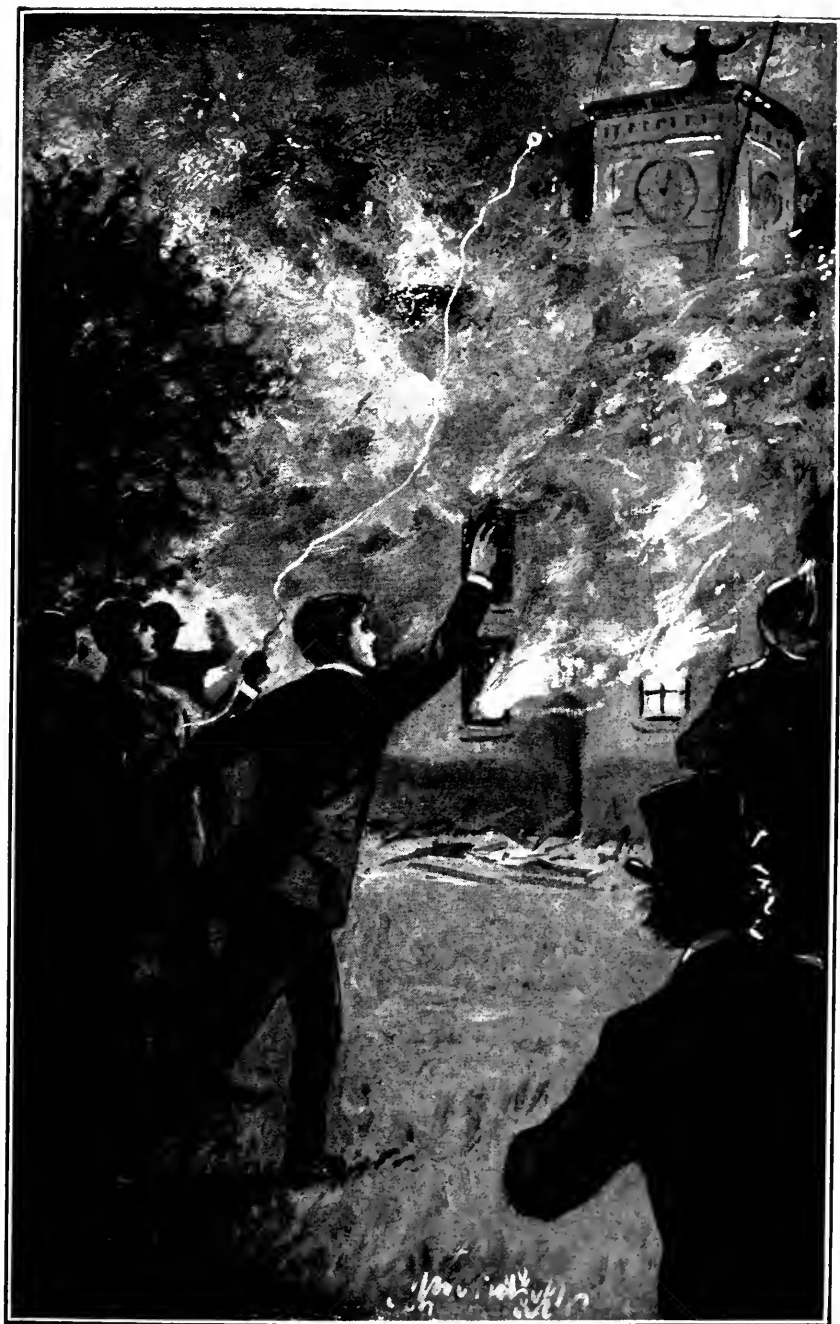
JOE hesitated a moment. Everything would depend on his one throw, because there was no chance to get another ball of cord, and if this one went wide it would fall into the fire and be rendered useless.

The fire was increasing, for all the chemicals in the tank on the wagon had been used, and no fresh supply was available. Below the tower on which the man stood, the flames raged and crackled. Even the tower itself was ablaze a little and at times the smoke hid the man from view momentarily.

"I'll have to wait until it clears," murmured the young pitcher, when, just as he got ready to throw, a swirl of vapor arose.

"You can't wait much longer," said Tom, in an ominously quiet voice.

"I know it," agreed Joe desperately, and it was but too evident. The tower itself, weakened by the fire, would soon collapse, and would carry



THE WHITE BALL WAS PLAINLY VISIBLE AS IT SAILED
THROUGH THE AIR.

the man down with it into the seething fire below.

"Throw! Throw!" urged several in the throng.

Joe handed the loose end of the cord to Tom. He wanted to give all his attention to throwing the ball. He poised himself as if he was in the pitching box. It was like a situation in a game when his side needed to retire the other in order to win, as when two men were out, three on bases and the man at bat had two strikes and three balls. All depended on one throw.

With a quick motion Joe drew back his arm. There was an intaking of breath on the part of the crowd that could be heard even above the crackling of the flames. All eyes were centered on the young pitcher.

"He'll never do it," murmured Hiram Shell.

"If he does he's a better pitcher than I'll ever be," admitted Frank Brown.

Suddenly Joe threw. The white ball was plainly visible as it sailed through the air, unwinding as it mounted upward. On and on it went, Joe, no less than every one in the crowd, watching it with eager eyes. And as for the man on the tower he eagerly stretched out his hands to catch the ball of cord, on which his life now depended.

Straight and true it went, as swift and as direct

a ball as Baseball Joe had ever delivered. Straight and true—on and on and then——

Into the hands of the anxiously waiting man went the ball of cord. Eagerly he clutched it, while the crowd set up a great cheer.

"That's the stuff!" yelled a man in Joe's ear. "You sure are one good pitcher, my boy!"

"Never mind about that now," said the practical Joe. "Fasten on the rope. Quick!"

Willing hands did this, and Joe looked to see if the knot would not slip. He seemed to have assumed charge of the rescue operations.

"Haul up!" he yelled to the man through the newspaper megaphone. "Haul up the rope and make it fast. Then, when I give the signal, slide down."

The man waved his hands to show that he understood, and the next moment he began pulling on the cord. The rope followed. Quickly it uncoiled from where the strands had been piled in readiness for just this. Up and up the man on the tower pulled it until he held the end of the heavy rope in his hands.

There now extended from the tower to the ground a slanting pathway of rope, such as is sometimes seen leading down into a stone quarry. It was high enough above the flames to enable a

man to swing himself along above them, though doubtless he would have to pass over a zone of fierce heat.

"All ready! Come on down!" yelled Joe, and the man on the tower lost no time in obeying.

He let go the rope as his feet touched the earth and then with a groan he collapsed. The crowd closed in around him, and two minutes later the tower, with a crash, toppled into the midst of the seething furnace of fire. The rescue had been made none too soon.

"Don't crowd around him so!" shouted Joe, hurrying over to where the man lay.

He pushed his way into the throng, followed by Tom, and the two lads actually forced the men and boys away from the man, who had evidently fainted. Joe whipped off his coat and made a pillow for the sufferer's head.

As he bent over him, the man's face was illuminated by the glare from the burning factory, and our hero started back in astonishment.

"Isaac Benjamin!" he exclaimed, as he recognized the former manager of the Royal Harvester works where Mr. Matson had been employed. Isaac Benjamin, the man who, with Mr. Rufus Holdney, had conspired to ruin Joe's father by getting his patents away from him.

"Isaac Benjamin!" said Joe again.

Mr. Benjamin opened his eyes. Into them came the light of recognition as he gazed into Joe's face. He struggled to a sitting position.

"Joe—Joe Matson!" he murmured. "I—I hope your father will forgive me. I—I——"

"There, don't think of that now," said Joe gently. "Are you hurt?"

"No—nothing of any consequence. I'm not even burned, thanks to you. I climbed up into the tower when I found the place on fire. I—I—Joe, can you ever forgive me for trying to ruin your father?"

"Yes, of course. But don't talk of that now," Joe said, while the crowd looked on and wondered at the man and boy knowing each other—wondered at their strange talk.

"I—I must talk of that now—more—more danger threatens your father, Joe."

Joe thought perhaps the man might be in a delirium of fright, and he decided it would be best to humor him.

"That's all right," he said soothingly. "You'll be taken care of. We've sent for a doctor. How did you come to be in the old factory?"

"I—I was sleeping there, Joe." Mr. Benjamin's tones did not indicate a raving mind.

"Sleeping there?" There was surprise in the boy's voice.

"Yes, Joe, I'm down and out. I've lost all my money, my friends have gone back on me—though it's my own fault—I have lost my home—my position—everything. I'm an outcast—a tramp—that's why I was sleeping there. There were some other tramps. They were smoking—I guess that's how the fire started. They got away but I couldn't."

The man's voice was excited now, and Joe tried to calm him. But Mr. Benjamin continued.

"Wait, Joe, I have something to tell you—something important—a warning to give you. If we—can we talk in private?"

"Yes, later, when you are stronger," answered the lad soothingly.

"Then it may be too late," went on Mr. Benjamin. "I am strong enough now. It was just a passing faintness. I—I am weak—haven't had much to eat—I'm hungry. But no matter. Here, come over here, I'll tell you."

He struggled to his feet with Joe's aid and led the lad aside from the crowd, which parted to make way for them.

"I'm down and out, Joe. Money and friends all gone."

"What about Mr. Holdney?"

"He too, has deserted me—turned against me, though I helped him in many schemes. I'm nothing but a tramp now, Joe."

The young pitcher looked at the wreck of the man before him. Truly he was "down and out." His once fine and well-dressed appearance had given place to a slouchy attire.

"But I must tell you, Joe. Your father's patent rights are again in danger. Rufus Holdney is going to try to get some valuable papers and models away from him. That's what he and I quarreled over. I'd do anything to spoil his plans, after he has thrown me off as he has. I left him, and since then I have had only bad luck. I don't know how I came to come here. I didn't know you were here. But warn your father, Joe, to look well after his new patents. Warn him before it is too late."

"I will," promised Joe, "I will. Thank you for telling me. Now we must look after you." And indeed it was high time, for, as the young pitcher spoke Mr. Benjamin tottered and would have fallen had not our hero caught him.

"Quick, get a doctor!" cried Joe, as the crowd surged up again around the unfortunate man, who had fainted.

CHAPTER XXI

BAD NEWS

ATTENTION was divided, on the part of the crowd, between the man who had been rescued, and the fire. The old factory was now burning fiercely and it was useless to try to save the structure. In fact, nearly everyone was glad that it had been destroyed, for it would harbor no more tramps. So the man who had been so thrillingly rescued was the greater attraction.

Fortunately there was a doctor in the throng, and he gave Mr. Benjamin some stimulants which quickly brought him out of his faint. Then a carriage was secured, and the man was taken to the village hotel, Joe agreeing to be responsible for his board. Though Mr. Benjamin had treated Mr. Matson most unjustly, and had tried to ruin him, yet the son thought he could do no less than to give him some aid, especially after the warning.

“Well, I guess it’s all over but the shouting,

as they say at the baseball games," remarked Tom to Joe "Let's get home. I'm cold," for they had both been drenched over the upper part of their bodies by the initiation, and the night wind was cold, in spite of the fact that Spring was well advanced.

"So am I," admitted Joe, as he watched the carriage containing Mr. Benjamin drive off. "I'd like some good hot lemonade."

The fire now held little attraction for our friends and they hastened back to the dormitory, Joe explaining on the way how he had unexpectedly rescued a former enemy of his father's.

"And aren't you going to send some word home about that warning he gave you?" asked Tom, as Joe finished. "That Holdney scoundrel may be working his scheme now."

"Oh, yes, sure. I'm going to write to dad as soon as we get back to our room. Sure I'm going to warn him. I'm mighty sorry for Mr. Benjamin. He's a smart man, but he went wrong, and now he's down and out, as he says. But he did me a good service."

"It doesn't even things up!" spoke Teeter. "He surely would have been a gone one but for you."

"Oh, some one else might have thought of that

way of getting him down if I hadn't," replied Joe modestly. "I remember a story I read in one of the books I had when I was a kid. A fellow was on a high chimney, and a rope he had used to haul himself up slipped down. A big crowd gathered and no one knew how to help him. His wife came to bring his dinner and she got onto a scheme right away.

" 'Hey, John!' she called 'unravel your sock. Begin at the toe!' You see he had on knitted socks. Well, he unravelled one, got a nice long piece of yarn and lowered it to the ground. He tied on his knife, or something for a weight. Then they fastened a cord to the yarn, and a rope to the cord, he pulled the rope up and got down off the chimney."

"Your process, only reversed," commented Tom. "I say fellows," he added, "let's run and get warmed up. I'm shivering."

"It was warm enough back there at the fire," said Teeter, as he looked to where the blaze was now dying out for lack of material on which to feed.

"Beastly mean of Hiram and Luke," commented Peaches. "They're getting scared I guess. I hope we get 'em out of the nine before the season's over."

Joe and Tom entertained their friends with crackers and hot lemonade, and none of the professors or monitors annoyed them with attentions. They must have known of it, when Peaches went to get the hot water in the dormitory kitchen, but it is something to have a hero in a school, and Joe was certainly the hero of the night.

The two lads, who had been thoroughly soaked, stripped and took a good rub down, and this, with the hot lemonade, set them into a warm glow. Then they sat about and talked and talked until nearly midnight.

Joe wrote a long letter to his father explaining all the circumstances and warned him to be on the lookout. One of the janitors who had to arise early to attend to his duties promised to see that the missive got off on the first morning mail.

"There, now, I guess we'll go to bed," announced Joe.

There was much subdued excitement in chapel the next morning, and Dr. Fillmore made a reference to the events of the night before.

"I am very proud of the way you young gentlemen behaved at the fire," he said. "It was an exciting occasion, and yet you held yourselves well within bounds. We have reason to be very proud

of one of our number who distinguished himself, and——”

“Three cheers for Joe Matson!” yelled Peaches, and they were given heartily—something that had never before happened in chapel. Dr. Fillmore looked surprised, and Professor Rodd was evidently pained, but Dr. Rudden was observed to join in the ovation, over which Joe blushed painfully.

Joe caught a cold from his wetting and exposure. It was nothing serious, but the school physician thought he had better stay in bed for a couple of days, and, much against his will the young pitcher did so.

“How is baseball practice going on?” he asked Tom after the first day. “I wish I could get out and watch it.”

“Oh, it’s going pretty good. We scrubs have a hard job holding the school nine down when you’re not there to pitch. There’s a game with Woodside Hall to-morrow, and I guess we’ll win.”

Excelsior Hall did win that contest, but not by as big a score as they should have done. It was the old story of Hiram and Luke not managing things right, and having weak pitchers. Still it

was a victory, and served to elate the bully and his crony.

It was on the third day of Joe's imprisonment in his room, and his cold was much better. He had heard that Mr. Benjamin had recovered and left the hotel; no one knew for what place.

He sent Joe a note of thanks, however, and it came in with some mail from home. Joe opened the home letters first. There was one from his father, enclosed in one from his mother and Clara.

"Dear Joe," wrote Mr. Matson. "I got your warning, but it was too late. Why didn't you telegraph me? The night before your letter got here some valuable papers and models were stolen from my new shop. I have no doubt but that Holdney did it—he or some of his tools. It will cripple me badly, but I may be able to pull through. I appreciate what Benjamin did for us, and it was mighty smart of you to save him that way. But why didn't you telegraph me about the danger to my models?"

"That's it!" exclaimed Joe bitterly to himself. "What a chump I was. Why didn't I telegraph dad, and then it would have been in time. Why didn't I?"

CHAPTER XXII

BITTER DEFEAT

JOE'S first act, after receiving the bad news from home, was to sit down and write his father a letter full of vain regrets, of self-accusation, upbraiding himself for having been so stupid as not to have thought of telegraphing. He hastened to post this, going out himself though barely over his cold.

"I'm not going to take any more chances," he remarked to Tom. "Maybe that other letter wasn't mailed by the janitor, or it would have gotten to dad in time."

"Hardly," remarked his chum. "Your father says the things were taken the night before your letter arrived, so you would have had to write the day before to have done any good. Only a telegram would have been of any use."

"I guess so," admitted Joe sorrowfully. "I'm a chump!"

"Oh, don't worry any more," advised his friend. "Let's get at some baseball practice. The school has two games this week."

"Who with?" asked Joe.

"Woodside Hall and the Lakeview Preps. We ought to win 'em both. They need you back on the scrub. The first nine has had it too easy."

"And I'll be glad to get back," replied the young pitcher earnestly. "It seems as if I hadn't had a ball in my hands for a month."

Joe mailed his letter and then, as the day was just right to go out on the diamond, he and Tom hastened there, finding plenty of lads awaiting them. A five-inning game between the scrub and school teams was soon arranged.

"Now boys, go in and clean 'em up!" exclaimed Luke, as his men went to bat, allowing the scrub the advantage of being last up. This was done to make the first team strive exceptionally hard to pile up runs early in the practice.

"Don't any of you fan out," warned Hiram. "I'm watching you."

"And so am I," added Dr. Rudden, the coach, as he strolled up. "You first team lads want to look to your laurels. You have plenty of games to play before the finals to decide the possession of the Blue Banner, but remember that every league game counts. Your percentage is rather low for the start of the season."

He was putting it mildly. The percentage of Excelsior Hall was exceedingly low.

"Beat the scrub!" advised the coach-teacher.

"They can't do it with Joe in the box!" declared Tom; and Luke and Hiram sneered audibly. Their feeling against our two heroes had not improved since the event of the initiation.

The scrub nine was not noted for its heavy hitting, but in this practice game they outdid themselves, and when they came up for their first attempt they pulled down the lead of four runs which the school nine had, to one. There was an ominous look on the faces of Luke and Hiram as the first team went to bat for the second time.

"Make 'em look like a plugged nickel," advised Tom to his pitching chum. "The worse you make 'em take a beating the more it will show against Hiram and Luke. We want to get 'em out of the game,"

"All right," assented Joe, and then he "tightened up," in his pitching, with the result that a goose egg went up in the second frame of the first team.

Even Dr. Rudden looked grave over this. If the school nine could not put up a better game against their own scrub, all of whose tricks and mannerisms they knew, what could they do against

the two regular nines with whom they were to cross bats during the week? When the scrubs got another run, Joe knocking a three bagger, and coming home on Tommy Barton's sacrifice, there was even a graver look on the face of the coach. As for Luke and Hiram, they held a consultation.

"We'll have to make a shift somewhere," declared Hiram.

"I'll just let Akers go in the box in place of Frank Brown," decided the captain.

"No, that's not enough," insisted the manager. "You don't know how to play your own men."

"I know as much as you do about it!" fired back Luke. Of late the bully and his crony had not agreed overwell.

"No, you don't!" reaffirmed Hiram. "I tell you what you ought to do. You ought to get rid of Peaches, Teeter and George Bland."

"Why, they're three of the best players on the nine."

"No, they're not, and besides they're too friendly with Joe Matson and Sister Davis. They don't half play. They make errors on purpose, just to make the school team have a bad reputation."

"Why should they do that?"

"Don't you understand, you chump?" They want to force you and me out. That's their game. They're sore about that meeting, and Matson and Davis are sore about lots of things. Peaches and the other two think if they get us out there'll be a chance for Joe to pitch."

"So that's their game, is it?" exclaimed Luke. "Well, I'll put a stop to it. I'll make subs of Peaches, Bland and Teeter, and put in some other players. They can't come it over me that way."

"Play ball!" called the umpire, for the talk between the captain and manager was delaying the game.

"Oh, we'll play all right," snapped Luke, and he knew that he and his nine had to, for the score was now tie. "Peaches, Teeter, Bland, you can sit on the bench a while!" went on Luke. "Wilson, Natch and Gonzales, you'll take their places."

"What's that for?" asked the innocent and unoffending Peaches.

"Have we played so rotten?" Teeter wanted to know.

"I made the changes because I wanted to," snapped Luke. "Go sit down with the other subs, and we'll see if we can't play a decent game."

Perhaps Peaches and his chums may have un-

derstood the reason for Luke's act, but if they did, they did not say so. The game went on with the three new players, and the result may be imagined. The scrub continued to get ahead, and the school nine could not catch up because Joe was pitching in great form, and striking out man after man, though he was hit occasionally.

"This is worse than ever," growled Hiram, when another inning passed and the scrub was five runs ahead. "Change back again, Luke."

"Say, they'll think I'm crazy."

"Can't help it. We'll be worse than crazy if we don't win this little measly game. And think what will happen Friday and Saturday. Change back."

So Peaches, Teeter and George were called from the bench again, and they played desperately. There was a general tightening all along the line, and the school nine began to see victory ahead. Joe got a little wild occasionally, principally because he was out of practice, but the best the school nine could do was to tie the score in the fifth inning, and it had to go to seven before they could win, though they had planned to play only five. The school nine won by a margin of one.

"That's too close for comfort, boys," said the

coach. "Why didn't you have a little mercy, Joe?" he asked of the young scrub pitcher.

"I will next time—maybe," was the laughing answer. Luke and Hiram scowled at him as they passed. They would have witnessed with pleasure his withdrawal from the school. But Joe was going to stick.

"What are we going to do?" asked Luke of Hiram as they walked on.

"About what?"

"The nine. We've just *got* to win these two games."

"Well, we'll have to do some more shifting, I guess, and Brown and Akers have got to tighten up on their pitching. We'll try some more shifting."

"Oh, you make me sick!" exclaimed the captain. "Always changing. What good does that do?"

"Say, I'm manager of this nine!" declared the bully, "and if you don't like the way I run things, you know what you can do."

Luke subsided after that. He was afraid of Hiram, and he wanted to remain as captain. The two discussed various plans, but could come to no decision.

The inevitable happened. In the game with

Woodside the Excelsiors managed to get a few runs in the early innings, but their opponents did likewise, because the Hall pitcher could not hold the batters in check. Then Woodside sent in another pitcher, better than the first, and the Excelsior's got only a few scattering hits, while, after shifting from Brown to Akers, Luke's nine did even worse, for Akers was pounded out of the box. The score was fifteen to six in favor of Woodside when the final inning ended, and the Excelsiors filed off the diamond in gloomy mood.

"Well, it couldn't have been much worse," growled Luke to the manager.

"Oh, it was pretty bad," admitted Hiram, "but we'll whitewash the Preps."

The Excelsior Hall nine journeyed to the Lakeville school full of hope, for the lads there did not have a very good reputation as hitters, and their pitcher was not out of the ordinary. But it was the same old story—mismanagement, and a captain of the Excelsiors who didn't dare speak his own mind.

If Luke had been allowed to run the team to suit himself he might have been able to do something with it, but Hiram insisted on having his way.

The result can be imagined. Instead of beat-

ing the Lakeville boys by a large score, as they had done the previous year, Excelsior was beaten, nine to seven.

"Well, it's not as bad as the last game," was all the consolation Hiram could find.

"Say, don't talk to me!" snapped Luke. "Something's got to be done!"

"That's right," put in Peaches, who came up just then. "Something has got to be done, Hiram Shell, and right away, too."

He looked the bully squarely in the face. Behind Peaches came Teeter, George Bland and several of the subs.

"What—what do you mean?" stammered Hiram.

"I mean that it's either you or us," went on Peaches.

"Either you get out as manager or we get out as players," added Teeter. "We're tired of playing on a nine that can't win a game. We can play ball, and we know it. But not with you, Hiram. What's it going to be—you or us?"

"Say!" burst out the bully. "I'll have you know that——"

A hand was placed on his shoulder. He wheeled about to confront Dr. Rudden.

"I think something *must* be done," said the

coach quietly. "Call a meeting of the Athletic Committee, Shell."

"What for?" asked the bully.

"To discuss the situation. There has got to be a change if Excelsior Hall is to have a chance for the Blue Banner. If you don't call the meeting, Shell, I will."

It was perhaps the best thing that could have happened, and to save friction among the students, many of whom were still for the manager, Hiram knew he had to give in to Dr. Rudden.

"All right," he growled. "The meeting will take place to-night."

Quickly the word went around through the precincts of Excelsior Hall.

"There's going to be another hot meeting."

"Hiram's on his last legs."

"His game is up now."

"This means that Joe Matson will pitch, sure, and we'll win some games now."

"If Hiram goes, Luke will, too, and there'll be a new captain."

These were only a few of the comments and predictions made by the players and other students as they got ready to attend the session.

CHAPTER XXIII

HIRAM IS OUT

THERE was an ominous silence over the gathering in the gymnasium. It was entirely different from the former meeting which started in such a hub-bub, and which created such a stir. This time it meant "business," as Peaches said.

Hiram called the session, but refused to preside. He wanted to be able to say what he thought from the floor, and from the manner in which he and Luke and one or two of their friends conferred before the session opened, it was evident that Hiram was going to make a fight to maintain his prestige.

"Come to order, young gentlemen," suggested Dr. Rudden, when the gymnasium was well filled. It seemed as if every lad in Excelsior Hall was there. "You know what we are here for——"

"To elect a new manager and captain!" shouted someone.

"Stop!" commanded the coach, banging his gavel.

"Who said that?" cried Hiram, springing to his feet. "If I find out——"

"Silence!" commanded the chairman, while Luke pulled his crony to his seat.

"This meeting will be conducted in a gentlemanly manner, or not at all," went on the professor quietly; but the boys knew what he meant. "We are here to discuss the baseball situation, and try to decide on some plan for bettering the team. I will hear suggestions."

"I just want to say one thing," began Hiram. "I have managed this team for three seasons, and——"

"Mis-managed it," murmured someone.

"Why didn't we get the Blue Banner?" asked another voice.

"Young gentlemen, you will have to keep from making side remarks, and interrupting the speakers," said Dr. Rudden. "Go on, Shell."

"I never had any kicking on my management before," continued Hiram, glaring at those around him. "I can manage it all right now, and it's only some soreheads——"

"Rather unparliamentary language," the chairman warned him.

"If we had a few good players we could win

every game," went on the bully. "But the season is young yet, and——"

"I don't think that is a valid excuse," said the professor. "You had your choice of the whole school in picking the nine, so it is the fault of yourself and the captain if you haven't a good team. As for the earliness of the season, the boys have had plenty of practice and they ought to have struck their gait before this. I'm afraid something else is to blame."

"We need better pitchers for one thing!" called someone.

"That's right!" yelled a double score of voices, and Dr. Rudden, seeing the sway of sentiment, did not object.

"We've got two good pitchers!" fairly yelled Hiram. "I know what this all means—that Joe Matson and his crowd——"

"That will do," the chairman warned him.

"It's true!" exclaimed Frank Brown, jumping to his feet. "I'm not a good pitcher, and I don't mind admitting it. I can't hold the other fellows down enough. If I could, we would have won these last two games, for our boys can bat when they haven't the heart taken out of them."

"That's the way to talk!" cried Tom Davis.

"Nothing like being honest about it," com-

mented Dr. Rudden. "That statement does you credit, Brown. How many of you think the same—that a different pitcher would strengthen the team?"

"I! I! I!" yelled scores.

"It's not so! Our pitchers are good enough!" These cries came from Luke, Hiram and a few of their cronies.

"There seems to be a division of opinion," began the chairman. "I think we had better vote on it."

"There are a lot of fellows here who have no right to vote!" cried Hiram.

"That won't do, Shell," said Dr. Rudden sternly. "This is a matter that concerns the entire school—to have a winning nine. Every student is entitled to vote."

"Hurrah!" yelled Tom. "This is a victory all right. The end of Hiram, Luke and Company has come."

"You'll pitch on the school team, Joe!" called Peaches in our hero's ear.

"I'd like to," Joe answered back, "but I'm afraid——"

"All in favor of having a change in pitchers, since Frank Brown has been good enough, and manly enough, to say that he knows his own weak-

ness—all in favor of a change vote 'aye'," directed the chairman.

"Aye!" came in a thunderous chorus.

"Contrary minded——"

"No!" snapped Hiram. Luke and Jake Weston followed with feeble negatives. They, too, were beginning to see which way the wind blew.

"Whom will you have for pitcher?" asked the Professor. "Can you decide now, or will you wait and——"

"Decide now!" was yelled. "Joe Matson for pitcher! Baseball Joe. Joe Matson!" was cried in different parts of the room.

"Very well," assented the chairman. "This may be a wise move. All in favor of Joe Matson as pitcher, since Frank Brown, the regular boxman, has practically resigned—all say 'aye'."

Again came the hearty assent, and again the feeble objection of Hiram.

"Joe Matson is now the regular pitcher for the school nine," said Dr. Rudden.

"And I want to say that I'm glad of the change," put in Larry Akers.

"Hurray! Hurray!" yelled the now excited and enthusiastic students. Things seemed to be coming out right after all.

"I want to say," exclaimed Joe, "that while

I appreciate the honor done me, we may need substitute pitchers. In fact, I'm sure we will, and I wish Frank and Larry would remain to help me. I'll coach them all I can, and I know they both have pitching stuff in them. I've made quite a study of pitching as an amateur. Some day I hope to be a professional, and I'm willing to tell Frank and Larry all I know."

"Good!" exclaimed the chairman. "I think they'll take your offer. Well, we have now made one change. Are there any more that you think necessary?"

It was rather a delicate question, for everyone knew what was meant. But the lads were saved from doing what most of them knew ought to be done."

"Do I understand that Joe Matson is the regular pitcher on the school team?" asked the manager, sourly.

"That seems to be the sentiment of the students, Shell," answered Dr. Rudden.

"And without me, or the captain, having anything to say about it?"

"You were out-voted, Shell."

"Well, then all I've got to say is that I don't manage this nine any more!" fairly yelled Hiram. "There's my resignation, and it takes effect at

once!" and, walking down the aisle he threw a folded paper on the table at which the professor sat.

"Shall this resignation be accepted?" asked the chairman, amid a rather tense silence.

"Yes!" came so quickly and with such volume that there was no doubt about the sentiment of the crowd. Perhaps Hiram had hoped that he would be asked to reconsider it, but if so he was disappointed. He walked back to where Luke sat. He leaned over the captain and said something in a whisper.

"I'm not going to," replied Luke, loudly enough for all in the room to hear.

"Go on!" ordered the bully. "If you don't, I'll——" and then his voice sank to a whisper again.

"All right," assented Luke, and walking forward as his crony had done, he, too, tossed a paper on the table. "There's my resignation as captain and a member of the Excelsior baseball nine!" he exclaimed.

There was a gasp of surprise from the crowd. Hiram and Luke both out! It was rather unexpected, but Tom and his friends felt elated. Now they would have a chance to play. It looked like the dawn of a brighter day for Excelsior Hall.

CHAPTER XXIV

TWO OF A KIND

"THERE is another resignation to act on," said Dr. Rudden, after a pause, and, somehow he did not seem half as worried over it as Luke had hoped he would be. "What shall we do with it?"

"Take it!" exclaimed Tom, and it was accepted with a promptness that startled the former captain.

"The action taken to-night makes it necessary to elect a new manager and a captain," went on the professor. "Perhaps the manager should be elected first. Whom will you have?"

"Peaches Lantfeld," called some.

"Teeter Nelson," said others.

"George Bland! Sister Davis! Ward Gerard! Tommy Barton," called various lads. There were more nominations, but Peaches received the majority of votes, and was declared elected. Teeter was the first to congratulate him, and the others followed.

"Now a captain," suggested the chairman.

"Joe Matson!" yelled scores of voices.

"No, I can't accept," cried Joe, jumping to his feet. "If I'm going to pitch I want to give all my time to that. I'm much obliged, but I decline."

"I think it would not be wise to make your pitcher the captain, especially at this time," spoke Dr. Rudden. "The catcher is in a better position to captain a team, for he can see all the plays. You will have to have a new catcher, and——"

"Ward Gerard!" called Joe. "He's caught for me on the scrub, and——"

"Ward! Ward Gerard!" Scores of lads took up the calling of his name. He was very popular, and was elected in a minute, while Hiram and Luke, followed by Jake Weston, filed from the room in plainly-shown disgust, sneers on their faces.

Nothing more remained to do save to have a conference of the new captain and manager, to arrange for future practice and playing. This was soon done, and Ward told the lads to report early the next Monday afternoon, when they would play the scrub, which organization had also to select a new captain and pitcher, as well as catcher.

"Now, all I want is to get Tom Davis on the

school nine, and I'll be happy," said Joe to Peaches and Teeter, as the meeting broke up.

"I think you can," declared Teeter. "Jake Weston is going to get out, I hear, and Tom will fit in. Charlie Borden can take Jake's place at short and Tom can play first, which he's used to. Oh, I guess old Excelsior Hall has come into her own again, and we'll make some of these other teams sit up and take notice."

And Jake did resign, following the example of his two cronies. This made a place for Tom, and he promptly filled it.

There was a snap and a vim to the playing of the school nine when they first went at it with the changed players, that fairly took the breath out of the scrub. Of course that unfortunate collection of players was weakened by the withdrawal of Joe, Ward and Tom, but even with players of equal strength it is doubtful if they could have held the school nine down.

Joe and his mates struck a winning streak, and the young pitcher never was better than in that practice game on Monday afternoon.

"Joe's pitching his head off," observed Tom Davis, and when Ward missed holding one or two particular "hot" ones he thought the same thing. The school team won a decisive victory.

"But that doesn't mean we will beat Trinity on Saturday," said Peaches, the new manager. "Don't begin to take it easy, fellows. And then follows the second game in the series with Morningside. We've got to get that or those boys will think they've gotten into the habit of beating us."

"We'll trim 'em both!" cried Tom.

"Sure," assented Joe. It was like old times now, he reflected, he and Tom together on a team as they had been on the Silver Stars. The only thing that worried Joe was the theft of his father's papers and patent models. He knew it would mean a serious loss to his parents, and Joe was rather in fear that he might have to leave boarding school.

"If I have to go away, I hope it won't be until after I have helped win back the Blue Banner," he confided to Tom.

"Oh, don't worry," advised his chum; and a few days later Joe received a letter from home, telling him the same thing.

Mr. Matson wrote that whereas the loss would badly cripple him, yet he did not want Joe to worry.

The game with Trinity was a source of delight to the Excelsior team. Their rivals came to the diamond battlefield eager for a victory, and they

worked hard for it, but the new combination was too much for them. When the final run was chalked up the score stood:

Excelsior Hall, 11; Trinity, 4.

"That's what we want to do to Morningside," said Tom.

"And we will!" predicted Joe.

They had hard practice before the second game with their ancient rivals—for Morningside was a foe whom Excelsior Hall was always eager to beat. In the series for the possession of the Blue Banner she had three games with Morningside and a like number with the other teams in the league.

It was the day of the second Morningside game, and it was to take place on the Excelsior diamond. The weather could not have been better. Spring was just merging into Summer, and the lads were on their mettle. There had been a big improvement in their playing, and they were ready to do battle to a finish.

Luke and Hiram had not been much in evidence since their resignations. They occasionally came to a game, or to practice, but they made sneering remarks, and few of the students had anything to do with them. It was quite a jolt for Hiram, used as he was to running matters to suit himself.

The crowd began arriving early at the Excelsior diamond, for word had gone around that it was to be a game for "blood," and both teams were on edge. If Excelsior had improved, so had Morningside. They had strengthened their men by long, hard practice, and they were confident of victory.

Joe and Tom had expected before this to hear something about their old enemy, Sam Morton, at Morningside, but the former pitcher for the Silver Stars was seldom mentioned. However, it was learned that he was to substitute in the Morningside-Excelsior game.

Out on the diamond trotted the renovated Excelsior nine. They were received with a burst of applause, and at once got to practice. A little later out came their rivals, and there was a cheer for them. Immediately the opposition cheering and shouting contingents got busy, and there was a riot of sound.

"Going to stay and see the game?" asked Luke of Hiram, as they entered the gate.

"Yes, might as well. Gee! But I hope our fellows lose!"

Nice sentiments, weren't they for an Excelsior student? But then Hiram was very sore and angry.

"So do I," added Luke. "It would show them what a mistake they made by dropping us."

"That's right," agreed the conceited Hiram. "If they had only waited we'd have come out all right. It was all the fault of Joe Matson and Tom Davis. I'll get square with 'em yet."

They strolled over the grounds, winding in and out amid the throngs. They almost collided with a Morningside player.

"Beg your pardon," murmured Luke. "Oh, it's Sam Morton," he added, for he had met Sam in town a week or so previously. "Have you met Hiram Shell, Sam," and he introduced the two.

"Oh, yes, you're the manager of the Excelsiors," said Sam. "Glad to know you. I think we'll beat you again. I may pitch after the fifth inning. I'm only the sub now, but I expect to be the regular soon."

"I *was* manager," replied Hiram bitterly, "but Joe Matson and his crowd put up a game on me, and I resigned."

"Joe Matson, eh? He's the same fellow who made a lot of trouble for me."

"Excuse me," murmured Luke. "I see a friend of mine. I'm going to leave you for a minute."

"All right," assented Hiram. "So Joe Matson made trouble for you, too, eh?" he went on to Sam, curiously.

"Yes, he played a mean trick on me, and took my place as pitcher," which wasn't exactly true, as my old readers know. "I'd like to get square with him some way," concluded Sam.

"Say, so would I!" exclaimed Hiram eagerly. "Shake hands on that. He's a low sneak, and he played a mean trick on me. I'd do anything to get even."

"Maybe we can," suggested Sam.

"How?"

"Oh, lots of ways. Come on over here where no one will hear us. Maybe we can fix up some scheme on him. I'd give a good deal to get even."

"So would I," added Hiram. "I wish I could get him off the nine, and out of the school."

"I'll help you," proposed Sam eagerly; and then the two, who were very much of a kind when it came to disliking our hero, walked off, whispering together.

"Play ball!" came the distant cry of the umpire, and the great Excelsior-Morningside game was about to start. But the plotters did not turn back to watch it.

CHAPTER XXV

BY A CLOSE MARGIN

"WHEW!" whistled Captain Elmer Dalton of the Morningside nine, as he greeted some of the lads against whom his team was to play, "you fellows have been making a lot of changes, haven't you?" and he looked at the several new members of the school team, including Joe and Tom.

"Yes, a bit of house cleaning," replied Ward Gerard. "I am captain now. Hiram and Luke got out."

"Yes, I heard there was some sort of a row."

"Oh, I suppose it's all over the league by this time," put in Peaches. "But it couldn't be helped. It was like a dose of bitter medicine, but we took it, and I think it's going to do us good."

"You mean *we're* going to do you good," laughed Elmer. "We're going to trim you again to-day."

"Not much!" cried Ward. "We'll win. Come now, a little wager between you and me—for the sodas, say."

"You're on!" agreed Elmer. "Where's your batting list?"

The two captains walked over to the scoring bench to arrange the details of the game. The two teams were made up as follows, this being the batting order:

EXCELSIOR—

George Bland....centre field
 Dick Lantfeld.....left field
 Harry Nelson...second base
 Nat Pierson.....third base
 Tom Davis.....first base
 Charles Borden....shortstop
 Harry Lauter....right field
 Joe Matson.....pitcher
 Ward Gerard.....catcher

MORNINGSIDE—

Dunlap Spurr....centre field
 Will Lee.....shortstop
 Wilson Carlburg....left field
 Ted Clay.....pitcher
 Wallace Douglass....catcher
 Elmer Dalton.....first base
 Walker Bromley...third base
 Loftus Brown...second base
 Harry Young.....right field

The Excelsiors were to bat last, and while the rival crowds of school boys were singing, cheering and giving their class yells, Joe Matson walked to the box for the second time as pitcher on the school nine in a big school league game. No wonder he felt a trifle nervous, but he did not show it, not even when some one yelled:

"Look at the new pitcher they've got! We'll get his number all right."

"Yes, we'll have his goat in about a minute!" added another Morningside partizan.

"Go as far as you like," answered Joe with a smile.

"Play ball!" yelled the umpire, and Joe faced

the first batter, Dunlap Spurr, who had the reputation of being a heavy hitter. Ward signalled for a low one, for he knew that Dunlap had a tendency to hit over such a ball. Joe nodded his head to show that he understood, and the next moment the horsehide went speeding toward the plate.

The batter swung viciously at it but—missed. He had gone half a foot over it.

“Strike!” cried the umpire.

“Make him give you a pretty one!” called Elmer. “He will if you wait.”

“He won’t have long to wait,” retorted our hero. This time he decided to send one over the corner of the plate, as he noticed that Dunlap had a free swing. Joe hoped he would strike at it and miss, and that was exactly what happened.

“Strike two!” howled the umpire, and there followed a gasp of dismay. Dunlap was not in the habit of doing this, and he rather scowled. Joe smiled.

“One more and we’ll have him down!” called the catcher.

“Where’d you get the pitcher?” asked a Morningside wit.

“Oh, we had him made to order,” replied Tom Davis, who was anxiously waiting on first.

Joe hoped he could make it three straight strikes, but his next was called a ball, and the Morningside supporters let out a yell of gratification.

"There's his glass arm showing! He's going to pieces!" they yelled. Joe shut his jaw grimly. He was going to fool the batter if possible, and the next ball he sent in was a puzzling inshoot.

Instinctively Dunlap started away from the plate, but he need not have moved, for the ball, with a neat little twist, passed him at a safe distance, and at a point where he could almost have hit it had he tried. But he did not move his bat, and an instant later the umpire called:

"Three strikes—batter out!"

Then indeed was there a gasp of dismay and protest from the big crowd of Morningside sympathizers, and the visiting nine.

"Say," began Dunlap Spurr, "that was never——"

"You dry up!" commanded his captain with a laugh. "It was a peach of a ball, and you ought to have hit it. Don't begin that way. We can beat 'em without that. Good work, Matson, but you can't keep it up. Come on, Lee; you're up next. Carlburg on deck."

Joe was immensely pleased, but he knew it was

only the beginning of the battle. He got two strikes on Lee and that player began to get worried. Then, after one ball, Lee hit the next one for a pop fly that Joe hardly had to step out of his box to get.

"Two down, play for all you're worth, Joe," called Ward; but Joe needed no such urging. However, something went wrong. Either Joe did not have as good control, speed or curving ability as when he had started in, or the next players found him. At any rate Carlborg knocked a dandy two bagger, and Ted Clay, who followed, duplicated the trick. Carlborg came in with the first run of the game, amid a riot of noise, and when Wallace Douglass hit safely to first, Clay got to third, coming in with the second run a little later, when Captain Dalton also singled.

"We've got 'em going! We've got 'em going!" yelled the delighted Morningside crowd, and it did seem so. Joe felt that he must tighten up, and strike out the next man, or all would be lost.

He glanced at the bench, where the jubilant Morningside players were sitting, all regarding him sharply. It was a supreme test. Then Joe caught the eyes of some one else on him. The eyes of Sam Morton, his old enemy.

It was like a dash of cold water. For the time being he had forgotten that Sam was the substitute pitcher on the visiting team, but had Joe seen him and Hiram in close consultation a little while previously, our hero would have had reason long to remember it.

"I'll show 'em I am still in the ring!" Joe murmured, and when he wound up for his next delivery he knew that he had himself well in hand again.

"Come on now, bring us all in!" urged Captain Dalton, when Walker Bromley got up to the plate. "He'll walk you, and then Loftus and Harry will have a show. We'll have the whole team up."

It began to look so, for already seven of the nine had been at bat. Joe might have wasted time trying to nail some lad who was playing too far off base, but he did not. Instead he sized up Bromley and sent him a swift one. The batter struck at it and missed. The next ball was called a strike, and attention was at fever heat. Would Walker hit it?

The question was answered in the negative a moment later, for he swung at it with all his force and fanned the air.

"Out!" called the umpire, and the side was retired. But Morningside had two runs, and the

way Joe had been hit by four men did not augur well for Excelsior's chances.

"Oh, we'll do 'em!" said Ward, with more confidence than he felt.

"I hope they pound Joe out of the box," murmured Hiram to Luke.

"So do I," said the former catcher.

Excelsior hoped for great things when it came her turn at stick-work, but alas for hopes! A series of happenings worked against her. George Bland rapped out as pretty a two bagger as one could wish, but he tried to steal third, slipped on a pebble when almost safe, and was thrown out. Peaches Lantfeld knocked a sharp grounder that looked almost certain to get past the shortstop; and it did, but the third baseman, who was a rattling good player, nabbed it and Peaches went down.

"Now, Teeter!" called Ward. "See what you can do."

Teeter got to first on a muffed fly, and it was Nat Pierson's turn. Nat could usually be depended on, but this time he could not. He fanned twice and the third time got two fouls in succession.

"Well, we're finding the ball, anyhow," said

Ward cheerfully. "Kill it next time, Nat, and give Sister Davis a show."

Nat tried to, but he knocked an easy fly, which the pitcher gathered in, and the opportunity of the Excelsior nine was over for that inning. A big goose egg went up in their frame. Score: 2—0, in favor of the visitors.

Joe took a long breath when he went into the box again, and facing Loftus Brown, struck him out in such short order that his friends began to breathe easier again. The game was far from lost, and as long as Joe did not allow his "goat" to be gotten, Excelsior might win yet. Then Harry Young, probably the poorest batter the visitors had, fanned thrice successively, and it was Dunlap Spurr's turn again. Joe knew just what to give him, and when he struck him out, after two foul strikes had been made, the crowd set up a yell.

The visitors did not get a run in their half of the second, and once more Excelsior had a show. Tom Davis singled, got around to third when Charlie Borden knocked a two-bagger, and slid home in a close play when Harry Lauter was thrown out at first. There was only one gone when Joe came to bat, and one run had come in. Joe knocked a safety, or at least it looked as if it was going to be that, but the shortstop, by a mag-

nificent jump into the air, nabbed it, and then came as pretty a double play as had ever taken place on that diamond. Joe was put out and Charlie Borden, who had been hugging third, was caught at home, for he was not a fast runner.

That retired the side, and there was only one run to match the two which Morningside had. Still it was something, and the home team began to take heart.

Then began what was one of the most remarkable games in the series. Joe did not allow a hit in the first half of the third inning and the Excelsiors got one run, tying the score. In the fourth the visitors pulled a single tally down, putting them one ahead, and then, just to show what they could do, the home team knocked out two, gaining an advantage of one.

The crowd was wild with delight at the clean playing, for both teams were on their mettle, and the rival pitchers were delivering good balls. But the fifth inning nearly proved a Waterloo for our friends. The Morningsides got four runs, which made Joe groan inwardly in anguish, for he was severely pounded.

"Maybe you'd better let Brown or Akers go in," he suggested to Ward.

"Not on your life!" cried the captain. "You are all right. It was just a slip. Hold hard and we'll do 'em."

Joe held hard, and there was a little encouragement when his team got one run, making the score at the ending of the fifth inning seven to five in favor of the Morningside team.

Once more in the opening of the sixth Joe did the trick. He allowed but one single, and then three men fanned in succession, while, just to make things more than ever interesting, the Excelsiors got two runs, again tying the score.

"Say, we'll have to wake up if we're going to wallop these fellows," confided the visiting captain to his lads. "They have certainly improved a lot by getting Hiram and Luke out."

"Oh, we'll do 'em," predicted Ted Clay, the pitcher.

From then on the Excelsiors fairly "played their heads off," and they ought to have done much better than they did when their hard work was taken into consideration. But there were many weak spots that might in the future be eliminated by good coaching, and Joe needed harder practice.

But in every inning thereafter the home team got at least one run, save only in the seventh. In their half of the sixth they got two, as I have said,

and though the visitors got one in their half of the seventh, again making the score one in their favor, in the eighth our friends got three, while the visitors got only two. So that at the close of the eighth the score was: Excelsior, 10; Morningside 10.

"A tie! A tie!" cried hundreds of voices. Indeed it had pretty nearly been a tie game all the way through, and it might go to ten innings or more.

"We've got to beat 'em!" declared Captain Ward. "Joe, whitewash 'em this inning, and in the next we'll get the winning run."

"I'll do it!" confidently promised the young pitcher, and he did. He was tossing the ball according to his old form again, and not a man landed his stick on it during the first half of the ninth. Then, as the home team came up for their last whacks (except in the event of the score being a tie), they were wildly greeted by their schoolmates.

"One run to beat 'em! Only one!" yelled the crowd.

"I guess it's all up with us," remarked the visiting captain to his men, as they took the field. "They're bound to get that one."

"Not if I can help it!" exclaimed the pitcher fiercely.

And it looked as if he was going to make good his boast, for he struck out two men in quick order. And then up came Tom Davis.

"Swat it, Tom. Swat it!" was the general cry. "Bring in a home run!"

"Watch me," he answered grimly.

Two srikes were called on him, and two balls. There was a nervous tension on everyone, for, unless Tom made good, the game would have to go another inning, when all sorts of possibilities might happen.

Ping!

That was the mighty sound of Tom's bat landing on the ball. Away sailed the horsehide—up and away, far over the head of the centre fielder, who raced madly after it.

"Go on! Go on!"

"Run, you swatter, run!"

"A homer! A homer!"

These cries greeted and encouraged Tom as he legged it for first base. On and on he went, faster and faster, rounding the initial bag, going on to second and then to third. The centre fielder had the ball now, but he would have to relay it in. He threw as Tom left third.

"Come on! Come on!" yelled Joe, jumping up and down.

"If you don't bring in that run I'll never speak to you again!" shouted Ward.

The crowd was in a frenzy. Men and women were standing up on the seats, some jumping up and down, others yelling at the tops of their voices, and some pounding each other on the back in their excitement.

On and on ran Tom, but he was getting weary now. The second baseman had the ball and was swinging his arm back to hurl it home. But Tom was almost there now, and he slid over the plate a full two seconds ere the ball landed in the catcher's big mitt.

"Safe!" howled the umpire.

"And we win the game!" yelled Joe, as he raced over to Tom and slapped him on the back, an example followed by so many others that poor Tom nearly lost his breath. "You won the game for us, Tom!"

"Nonsense! If you hadn't held 'em down by your pitching, Joe, my run wouldn't have done any good."

"That's right!" cried the others, and it was so. Excelsior Hall had won the second of the big games with her ancient rival, though it was by the narrow margin of one run.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE OVERTURNED STATUE

"THREE cheers for the Excelsiors!" cried the visiting captain, swinging his hat around in the air as a signal to his crowd, after the excitement had somewhat calmed. "Three good cheers, boys! They beat us fair and square! Three big cheers!"

And how they rang out! And how also rang out the return cheers, which Joe and his mates rendered. Never had applause sounded sweeter in the ears of our hero, for it seemed that the school nine had now begun to live in better days, since the dismissal of Hiram and Luke.

Joe kept at his pitching practice, and he himself knew, even had others, including Tom, not told him, that he was doing well.

"You're better than when you pitched for the Silver Stars," said Tom, "and you were no slouch then."

"Yes, I think I *am* more sure of myself," admitted Joe. "And I've got more speed and better

curves." It was natural that he should have. He was growing taller and stronger that Summer, and he had most excellent practice. He had not given up the idea of becoming a professional pitcher, and everything he could do tended that way for him.

He had heard nothing more definite from home, but Mr. Matson said he was still trying to trace the stolen models and papers.

"I'll help you when vacation time comes," said Joe in a letter. "But I'm playing ball for all I'm worth now."

"Keep at it," his father wrote back.

There were many games played that season by Excelsior Hall—many more than the previous Summer—for Spring had now given place to warm weather. The school term was drawing to a close, but there were still many more games to play in the league series.

In succession Excelsior met and defeated Trinity, the Lakeview Preps. and Woodside Hall. She was near the top of the list now, though Morning-side was quite a way in advance. It looked as if eventually there would be a tie for first place between the old rivals—a tie for the possession of the Blue Banner, and if there was it meant a great

final game. Joe looked forward to it with mingled fear and hope.

"How I hate him!" exclaimed Hiram to his crony, Luke, one day after a close game, when Joe's pitching had won again for Excelsior. "I wish I could get him out of the school, or off the nine, or something."

"Why don't you? I thought you and Sam Morton had some scheme."

"We thought so, too, but it fell through. But I've thought of something else, and if you and Sam will help me carry it out, I think we can put it all over that fresh guy."

"Sure, I'll help; what is it?"

"First we've got to get hold of something belonging to him—his knife, if it's got his name on; a letter addressed to him, that he's opened and read; a handkerchief with his name on; anything that would show he'd been in a certain place at a certain time."

"Suppose we do?"

"Leave the rest to Sam and me, if you can get us something."

"I'll do it!" promised Luke. "I'm on the same corridor with Joe now; I changed my room, you know. I shouldn't wonder but what I could sneak in and get something belonging to him."

"Do it, then. I've got a date with Sam, and I'll go see him. See if you can get something this afternoon or evening, and if you can we'll do it."

"I will," and the two plotters parted, the chief one to keep an appointment with Joe's enemy. Sam's hatred against our hero was increased because Sam was not allowed to pitch for his own team.

"I've got to keep Ted Clay in condition, so that when we meet Excelsior again he'll be on edge," said Captain Dalton of the Morningsides. "That Matson is a wonder and we can't take any chances. I don't dare risk letting you pitch."

"That's another one I owe to Joe!" muttered Sam. "I must certainly get even with him. Hiram and I ought to pull off something," and then he sent word to the Excelsior bully. That afternoon the three conspirators, with guilty looks, met in a secluded place and talked over their plans.

There was a knock on Joe's door. His chum Tom had gone out that evening to a lecture, and our hero was all alone.

"Come!" called Joe, and from down the corridor Luke Fodick peered out of his slightly-opened door to see what was going on.

"Here's a telegram for you," said one of the school messengers, handing in a yellow envelope.

"A telegram for me," murmured Joe. "It must be from dad. I may have to send an answer. Did the messenger wait?"

"No, he's gone."

"All right, if I do have to wire, perhaps I can get permission to go in to town to do it."

Quickly Joe tore open the message. It was brief, and it was from his father.

"Understand Holdney is somewhere near Cedarhurst," the message read. "Keep a lookout, and if you get trace notify police there at once. Arrest on larceny charge."

"Rufus Holdney near here," murmured Joe. "I must keep my eyes open. I'll wire dad at once, telling him I'm on the job."

He hurried from his room, stuffing the telegram in his pocket as he went, and never noticing as he passed Luke's door that it fell out into the corridor.

"I hope I can get permission to go to the telegraph office," mused Joe as he hastened to the office. "I guess the doctor will let me when I tell him what it's about."

As Joe turned a corner out of sight, Luke sprang out, picked up the message and envelope, and exclaimed:

"This will do the trick! Now to find Hiram and Sam."

He hurried to tell his crony, who was being visited by Sam, and once more the three put their heads together, to work the ruin of our hero.

Joe easily obtained permission to go to town to send his message. He was rather surprised on looking in his pocket for his father's telegram, not to find it, but concluded that he had left it in his room. He did not really need it, anyhow, as he knew the contents perfectly well.

The telegraph office was closed when he reached it, but the operator lived near by, and agreed to open his place, and tick off the message. This delayed Joe, however, and he was rather late getting back to the school. He did not see a teacher to report to him, as he had been bidden to do, but hurried to his own room.

He was tired and soon fell asleep, noting that Tom was already in bed and slumbering. Joe did not look for his lost message.

There was a thundering knock at Joe's door the next morning. It awoke him and Tom.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Fire!"

"Fire! No. Haven't you heard the news?" asked the voice of Peaches. "There's a big row on."

"What's up?" demanded Tom, slipping out of bed, and opening the door.

"The Founder Statue has been pulled from its base, and overturned!" said Teeter, who was with Peaches. "Look, you can see it from your window."

Tom and Joe hastened to the casement to look. On the campus, not far from the school, stood a bronze statue of Dr. Theodore Whittleside, the original founder of the institution. It was a fine piece of work, the gift of several of the alumni societies, and was almost sacred. Now some ruthless hand had pulled it from its base, and part of one of the hands was broken off.

For a moment Joe and Tom stood aghast, looking at it. Then the meaning of it came to them. Some sacreligious student, or students, had done the deed.

"There'll be a peach of a row over this!" declared Teeter. "Hurry up and get to chapel. Old Cæsar is sure to spout a lot about it. It's sure dismissal for whoever did it."

"And it ought to be!" exclaimed Joe wrathfully.

"If they catch them," added Tom, thoughtfully. "I wonder who did it?"

CHAPTER XXVII

ON PROBATION

JOE did not get to chapel that morning. He was all ready to go with Tom and the others after making a hasty toilet, when a messenger came to the door.

"Dr. Fillmore wants to see you in his office, Joe," said the messenger—a nice lad who did this work to help pay for his tuition.

"Wants to see me—what for?" demanded our hero. "Are you sure that's right, Georgie?"

"Sure, and a teacher's there with him. I'm not sure but I think it's something about the overthrown statue. I heard them mention it as they called me to go for you."

"The overturned statue? I don't know anything about it!" exclaimed Joe. "I only just this moment saw it—from my window."

"Well, the doctor wants you, anyhow," repeated the messenger lad. "You'd better go."

"Oh, sure," assented Joe, and he started for

the doctor's study with wonder in his heart and a puzzled and rather an ominous look on his face. His companions regarded him seriously.

"What do you s'pose is in the wind?" asked Peaches.

"Give it up," remarked Teeter. "Are *you* on, Tom?"

"Nary a bit. First I knew of it was when you fellows came and told me."

"Was Joe out last night?" asked Peaches.

"That's so, he did go into town," replied Tom. "He left a note to tell me—but that was all straight—he had permission. It can't be that."

"Well, we'll hear in chapel," said Teeter.

"Ah, it's you is it, Matson?" asked the doctor, as our hero entered the study. There was a curious note in the master's voice, and he glanced narrowly at Joe. "Come in. I am sorry to have to summon you on such an unpleasant and important matter, but I have no choice. As you probably know, the Founder's Statue was overturned last night."

He looked questioningly at Joe.

"I just saw it from my window," was the simple answer.

"It was done last night," went on the doctor with a look at a teacher who acted as proctor. "It

was a disgraceful, vile piece of vandalism. The guilty one will be severely punished. Doubtless you are wondering why we sent for you. It was on account of this, which was picked up by one of the janitors in front of the statue, when he discovered its fallen position this morning."

Dr. Fillmore held out to Joe the telegram our hero had received from his father the night previous!

"Is this yours?" asked the doctor.

"Ye—yes, it came to me last night. It's from my father."

"What did you do after you got it?"

"Put it in my pocket and went out to answer it. I had permission from the proctor."

"That is right," assented that official. "But I did not see you come in."

"No, I was late. The telegraph office was not open, and I had to rouse the operator."

"When did you last see this telegram?" asked the doctor.

"I missed it soon after I started, but I concluded that I had dropped it," said Joe. Then it all came to him. The school authorities believed that the telegram had dropped out of his pocket when he was at the work of overturning the statue, in which vandalism he had no hand.

"It was picked up near where the vile work went on," said the doctor bitterly. "It is evidence that even if you had no actual hand in the dastardly horseplay, that you might have witnessed it, and you can tell us who did it. That is what we now call on you to do, Matson. Tell us who did it."

"But I don't know!" cried poor Joe. "I didn't see anything of it. I got in a little late, and went at once to my room. That telegram may have dropped from my pocket at any time, someone may have picked it up and put it—I mean dropped it—as they were passing the statue—either before or after it was pulled from the base."

"That is hardly likely," said the doctor. "I am very sorry, Matson, but I must conclude that even if you had no hand in the vandalism, that you know who did it, or suspect."

"But I don't!" cried Joe eagerly. "Someone may have put this telegram there to make it look——"

He stopped in some confusion. He never had been a "squealer," and he was not going to begin now.

"I think I know what you mean," said the doctor quietly. "You mean that some enemy of yours may have had an object in making it appear

as if you had a hand in this work." He looked narrowly at Joe.

"I—I, well, it might have happened that way."

"And of the students here, whom would you regard as your enemy?" asked Dr. Fillmore quickly.

"I—I—I must refuse to answer," said Joe firmly. "It would not be fair."

"You mean you won't tell?"

"I can't, Doctor. I haven't any right to assume that the telegram came there that way. I know that I didn't pass very near the statue, either on leaving or coming back to school. The message dropped from my pocket, I'm sure of that, but the wind may have blown it near the statue."

"There was no wind last night," said the proctor severely.

"Then—then——" stammered Joe.

"That will do, Matson," said the doctor quietly, and there was sorrow in his voice. "I will not question you further. I am convinced that if you had no hand in the actual overturning of the statue, that you know something of how it was done, or who did it. Are you prepared to tell us?"

"No, sir, I am not. I—can't."

"I think I understand," said Dr. Fillmore. "Very well. Understand, we do not accuse you of anything, but under the circumstances I must put you on probation."

"Probation?" murmured Joe.

"Yes," added the proctor as the doctor turned away. "That means that you will not be allowed to leave the school grounds. You will report to your classes and lectures as usual, but you will not be allowed to take part in athletic contests."

"Not—not baseball?" gasped Joe.

"Not baseball," replied the proctor. "I am sorry, but that is the rule for one who is on probation. When you make up your mind to make a complete confession, and tell whom you saw at the work of tearing down the statue——"

"But I didn't——" began Joe.

"That will do," interrupted the proctor gently. "You are on probation until then. And you will not be allowed to play baseball."

Joe felt his heart wildly thumping under his coat. Without a word he turned aside and went back to his room. And that is why he missed chapel that morning.

CHAPTER XXVIII

LUKE'S CONFESSION

THE anticipation of Teeter, Peaches and the others that there would be a sensation in chapel that morning was borne out. Never, in all their experience, had the boys recalled Dr. Fillmore being more bitter in his denunciation of what he characterized as "sensational vandalism."

He liked boys to have good, clean healthy fun, he said, and an occasional prank was not out of order, but this pulling the statue from its base passed all bounds. More and more bitter the good doctor became. Perhaps part of his feeling was due to the fact that the Founder had written a book on Cæsar that the head of the school considered an authority, and you remember how fond Dr. Fillmore was of the writer of the "Commentaries."

The boys looked at each other as the denunciation proceeded, and there were whispers of:

"Who did it? Why doesn't he name some one?"

The doctor came to that part in a moment.

"We are unable to say who perpetrated this act of sensational vandalism," he went on, "but I may say that once the students are discovered they will be instantly dismissed from Excelsior Hall—this is no place for them. I say we do not know who did it, but we have reason to suspect——"

Here the good doctor paused and there was an uneasy movement among several lads.

"We have reason to suspect that some one knows who did it, but will not tell. I am sorry to say that we have been obliged to inflict the usual punishment on this—ahem—student and he is now on probation. The usual exercises will now be held."

They went on, but it is doubtful if the lads were in a very devotional spirit. Joe's absence was at once noted, and of course it was guessed why he was not there, though being on probation did not bar one from chapel or classes.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Tom, when they were on their way to first lectures. "It's Joe! Who'd ever dream it?"

"So that's why he was wanted in the office," added Peaches.

"I don't believe he had a thing to do with it!" declared Teeter vehemently.

"Of course not!" chorused the other two.

"But they evidently think he does," went on Tom. "Here he comes now; let's ask him."

"Say, what does it all mean anyhow?" inquired Teeter when he had warmly clasped Joe's hand.

The young pitcher told of the finding of the telegram, and its result.

"But, hang it all, that's no evidence!" burst out Tom.

"The doctor thinks so," replied Joe grimly.

"Some one who has a grudge against you—Say!" exclaimed Teeter with a sudden change of manner. "I'll bet it was Luke or Hiram who did it—pulled the statue down and then tried to blame it on you."

"Sure!" chorused Tom and Peaches.

"Wait!" cried Joe. "It's bad enough for me to be suspected of knowing something that I don't, but we can't go to accusing even Hiram or Luke on mere guesswork. It won't do."

"But hang it all, man!" cried Peaches. "*You can't play ball.*"

"No," answered Joe quietly.

"And the league season is closing! How are we going to win without you in the box?"

"You'll have to—that's all. Brown or Akers

will have to twirl—they're pretty good at it now."

There were sorrowful shakes of the heads, but so it had to be. It may well be imagined that there was a sensation in Excelsior Hall when it was known that Joe was the one on probation, and he was urged by more than one to tell all he knew, no matter on whose shoulders the guilt would fall.

"But I don't know!" he insisted again and again. "And it wouldn't be fair to guess."

The days went on. Frank Brown was tried out in the box and did fairly well, thanks to the efficient coaching Joe had given him. Excelsior even won a game with him twirling, though by a narrow margin, and against a weak team.

But there were dubious shakes of the heads of the students—especially those on the team—when they thought of the games to come—the important final with Morningside. Still there was no help for it, and Brown and Akers redoubled their practice in anticipation.

There was no objection to Joe practicing, or in coaching the two substitute pitchers, and he did this every day. Our hero did not write home about the disgrace that had come so undeservedly upon him, merely telling general news, and assuring his father that he had kept a lookout, and

made inquiries, but had neither seen nor heard anything of Mr. Holdney.

Meanwhile the affairs of Mr. Matson—due to the theft of the models—were in anything but good shape. Still nothing could be done.

Joe bitterly felt his position. So did his chums, and they even tried their hand at amateur detective work, endeavoring to discover who had pulled down the statue and put Joe's telegram where it had been found. That it was put there was certain, for Joe, on the night in question, had not gone near the statue. In the meanwhile the bronze had been put back in place and repaired. Among the students there were those who thought they knew the guilty ones, but nothing definite was disclosed.

The school term was drawing to an end. After the hard work of getting the ball team into shape for championship honors it was hard to see it begin to slip back. Yet this is what took place. Brown and Akers could not keep up the pace set by Joe, and several games were lost.

By hard work, and more due to errors on the part of their opponents, Excelsior won victories over Trinity and the preparatory school. This made her percentage just high enough so that if she should win from Morningside in the final game

the Blue Banner would come to her. But could Excelsior win? That was what every lad there asked himself.

It was rumored that Morningside was never in better shape. Ted Clay, the pitcher, was twirling in great form it was said, and Sam Morton, as substitute, was sure to go in for several innings in the final contest.

"They say he's a wonder for a short time," Peaches confided to Joe.

"He is," frankly admitted our hero. "I know his style. He can't last, but he's good for part of a game. With him and Ted against us I'm afraid it's all up with our chances."

"Oh, Joe, if you could only play!"

"I want to as much as you want me, Peaches, but it's out of the question."

"Maybe if we were to put it up to the doctor—that we would lose the Blue Banner without you—he'd let you play."

"I couldn't play that way, Peaches—under a ban. I want vindication—or nothing."

"Yes, I suppose so—only it's hard."

At last came the night before the final game with Morningside. There was a spirit of unrest and a sense of impending disaster abroad in Excelsior. Every student was talking of it, even

Hiram and Luke. The latter, for some days past had not been his usual self, and his crony could not understand it.

"What's the matter with you, anyhow?" Hiram asked. "Aren't you glad we did that chump Matson up good and brown?"

"Oh, well, I don't know," answered Luke slowly. "I didn't think it would mean that we'd lose the Blue Banner."

"How do you know we are going to lose it?"

"Of course we are. Morningside will win, with no good pitcher to hold her down, and Joe is a good pitcher, no matter what hand he had in getting us out of the nine. I'm sorry I got out anyhow. I'd like to be on it now."

"You're sorry?" gasped Hiram.

"Yes, I wouldn't have resigned only you made me."

"I made you! Say, what's eating you, anyhow? You were as hot against Matson and his crowd as I was."

"No, I wasn't, and while we're on this subject I'll tell you another thing. I'm mighty sorry I had a hand in that statue business."

"You didn't do anything—Sam and I yanked it down."

"I know, but I put Joe's telegram there—I'm

responsible for him being on probation, so he can't play to-morrow."

"Oh, you are; eh?" sneered Hiram. "Then you'd better go tell the doctor that."

"By Jove I will!" suddenly exclaimed Luke with a change of manner. "I haven't had a decent night's sleep since I did it. I am going to tell. I can't stand it any longer. I want to see Excelsior win the Blue Banner. I'm going to tell the doctor!"

"Hold on!" Hiram fairly hissed. "If you squeal I'll make it so hot for you that you'll wish you'd never seen me—and so will Sam."

"I'm not afraid! Besides I'm not going to tell on you—only on myself. I'll say I put the telegram there. The doctor can think what he likes about who pulled down the statue. He can put me on probation for I won't tell, but it doesn't matter, for I don't play ball. But that will let Joe play, and it's not too late for him to get in shape—in fact, he's at top notch, for I saw him practice to-day. I'm going to tell, and you can do as you like, Hiram."

"I say you shan't tell. I'll——"

But Luke slipped from Hiram's room, where the talk had been going on, and made his way to the doctor's office.

Dr. Fillmore, as may well be imagined, was surprised to see Luke at that late hour, for it was past eleven. He laid aside a book on the immortal Cæsar, looked over his glasses at the conscious-stricken lad, and asked in his kind voice:

“Well, Fodick, what is it?”

“I—I—Doctor Fillmore, I’ve come to—confess. I put that telegram by the statue. Joe Matson didn’t do it. He dropped it—I picked it up. He had nothing to do with pulling down the statue and doesn’t know who did it. But he’s got to play ball to-morrow or we’ll lose the Blue Banner again. I’m the guilty one, Doctor—not of pulling the statue down—I won’t tell who did that, no matter what you do to me. But I want Joe to play. Oh, I—I couldn’t stand it any longer. I haven’t slept, and—and——”

Poor Luke burst into a fit of weeping—hot, passionate tears of real sorrow—the best thing he had done in many a long day—and Dr. Fillmore, understanding a boy’s heart as few heads of schools do, put his big arm over Luke’s shoulder. Thus was the confession made, and of its effect you shall soon hear.

That night Luke slept soundly.

CHAPTER XXIX

A GLORIOUS VICTORY

IT WAS the morning of the day of the big game—the final contest between Morningside and Excelsior for the possession of the Blue Banner. So far the two nines were tied as regards their percentage of victories, and the banner would go to whoever won the diamond battle on this occasion.

Dr. Fillmore, after hearing Luke's confession, had sent a messenger to Joe's room with instructions to see if our hero and Tom were asleep. The apartment was in darkness and quiet reigned when the messenger listened, so he reported that both lads were slumbering. But he was not altogether right, for Joe tossed restlessly on his pillow and thought bitterly of the morrow.

"Well, as long as he is asleep," remarked the good doctor to the coach whom he had summoned, "we won't tell him the good news until to-morrow.

He'll need his rest if he is to pitch against Morningside."

"Then you're going to remove the probation ban, Dr. Fillmore?" asked Dr. Rudden eagerly.

"Of course. I shall make the announcement at chapel, and wish Matson and the others of the nine all success."

"And you don't yet know who pulled down the statue?"

"No. It was manly of Fodick to confess, and though I shall have to suspend him, of course, I didn't even ask him to inform on the guilty ones. I really couldn't, you know."

"No, I suppose not. But I'm glad Joe is going to play. I think we shall win."

"I hope so," murmured Dr. Fillmore.

The surprise and gratification of the students may easily be surmised when the next morning at chapel, Dr. Fillmore made his announcement, stating that Joe had been on probation under a misapprehension, and that now the ban was removed he could play ball.

"And I hope that he and the others of the nine play their very best," concluded the head of the school, "and win!"

There was a spontaneous cheer, and neither the doctor nor any of the teachers took the trouble

to stop it. Joe's face was burning red, his heart was thumping like a trip hammer, but he was the happiest lad in school.

"Oh, it's great! Glorious! I can't talk! Whoop!" yelled Teeter, once out of chapel, as he balanced himself on his toes.

"Say, old man, it's too good to be true!" cried Peaches, yelling and capering about until his usually fair complexion was like that of a beet.

"We'll make Morningside look like thirty cents!" declared Tom.

"Come on, you and Ward get in all the practice you can," ordered Peaches.

The game was to be played on the Morningside diamond, this having been decided by lot, the choice having fallen to the rivals of Excelsior.

"We'll, we'll beat 'em on their own grounds!" declared Peaches, when he and the others of the nine, with some substitutes, and a host of "rooters" and supporters, departed for the contest.

What a crowd was there to see! What hosts of pretty girls! Men and women, too; old graduates, students from both schools, many from other schools in the league, for this was the wind-up of the season.

Out on the diamond trotted the Morningside nine, to be greeted with a roar of cheers. They

began practice at once, and it was noticed that Sam Morton was "warming up."

"They're going to use two pitchers all right," observed Tommy Barton. "Guess they heard that Joe was going to be on deck again."

A noisy welcome awaited the Excelsior nine as they trotted out, and they, too, began batting and catching practice. Then, after a little delay and the submitting of batting orders, the details were completed, and once again the umpire gave his stirring call:

"Play ball!"

Morningside was to bat last and so George Bland was the first of the Excelsior players to face Pitcher Clay. The two nines were the same as had met a few weeks previously.

"Play ball!" called the umpire again, and the game was on.

It was a memorable battle. They talk of it to this day at Excelsior and Morningside. For three innings neither side got a run, goose eggs going up in regular succession until, as is generally the case "pitchers' fight" began to be heard spoken on the stands and side lines. And truly it was rather that way. Both Joe Matson and Ted Clay were at their best, and man after man fanned the

air helplessly, or stood while the umpire called strikes on them.

But there had to be a break, and it came in the fourth inning. In their half of that Excelsior again had to retire without a run, and the four circles looked rather strange on the score board.

Then something happened. Joe was delivering a puzzling drop, but his hand slipped, the curve broke at the wrong moment and the batter hit it for three bases. That looked like the beginning of the end for a little while, as the Morningside lads seemed to have struck a winning streak and they had three runs to their credit when Joe, after having struck two men out, caught a hot liner himself and retired the third man.

"Three to nothing," murmured Captain Ward as his men came in to bat again. "It looks bad—looks bad."

"That will only give us an appetite," declared Joe. "You'll see," and it did seem as if he were a prophet, for the rivals of Morningside, evidently on desperation bent, "found" Ted Clay, rapped out five runs, putting them two ahead, and then the crowd went wild.

So did Joe and his mates. They fairly danced as they took the field again; danced and shouted,

even jumping over each other in the exuberance of their joy.

"We've got 'em going! We've got 'em going!" they yelled.

Glumly, and almost in a daze, the Morningside players looked at the figures. Their rivals were two ahead in the fifth inning and Baseball Joe, the pitcher on whom so much depended, was "as fresh as a daisy," as Tom declared.

"But we haven't won the game by a whole lot!" warned Captain Ward to his enthusiastic lads. "Play hard—play hard!"

Morningside managed to get one run in their half of the fifth, but when Excelsior came up for her stick-work again she easily demonstrated her superiority over the other lads. Four runs went to her credit, and only one to the rival team, and then, as Peaches said, "it was all over but the shouting."

"The game is in the ice box now, all right," Teeter added.

And so it was. Two runs for Excelsior in the seventh to one for her opponent; four in the eighth, while Joe held the enemy hitless in their half of that inning, brought the score to the tally of fifteen to six in favor of our friends.

"Let's make it an even 20 fellows!" proposed

Teeter when they came to have their last raps in the ninth. "We can do it!"

"Sure!" his mates assured him, and it did seem possible, for Morningside appeared to have gone to pieces. Ted Clay was being batted all over the field, his support was poor, while the Morningside lads could not seem to find the ball.

In desperation, that last inning, Sam Morton was sent in, and he faced Joe with a scowl on his face. But Sam could not stem the winning tide, and he was batted for five runs, making the even twenty.

"Now, hold 'em down, Joe—don't let 'em get a run!" urged Teeter, when Morningside prepared to take her last chance to retrieve her falling fortunes.

And Joe did. Amid a riot of cheers he struck three men out in quick succession, and a final goose egg went up in the last frame, the score reading:

Excelsior, 20; Morningside, 6.

"The Blue Banner is ours! The Blue Banner comes back where it belongs!" yelled Joe, and then, amid a silence, the banner was taken from in front of the Morningside stand, where it had flaunted in the breeze, and presented to Captain Ward Gerard, who proudly marched about the diamond with it at the head of his victorious lads.

CHAPTER XXX

GOOD NEWS—CONCLUSION

THERE were the usual cheers first by the victors and then by the vanquished, and it would be hard to say which were the heartiest. For Morningside was a good loser and next to a well-beaten rival, she loved a staunch victorious one.

"You fellows certainly did us up good and proper—the worst beating we ever got," admitted Captain Dalton to Ward.

"That's what we came here for," was the reply. "It was Joe's twirling that did it."

"Get out!" cried the modest pitcher.

"Yes, that certainly held us down," went on Dalton. "We couldn't seem to find you. I'll need some new pitchers next season, I guess, for you certainly batted Ted and Sam all over. But I'm not kicking. How are you fixed for next year, Joe? Don't you want to come to Morningside?" and he laughed.

"I don't know," answered our hero. "I

haven't quite made up my mind what I shall do. I'm going to play ball, I know that much, anyhow.

"I should think you would—any fellow who can twirl the horsehide as you can. Well, might as well get off these togs," spoke Dalton. "I won't need 'em here any more this season, though I'm going to join some amateur team for the vacation if I can."

The cheering and yelling kept up for some time; and then with the glorious Blue Banner, that meant so much to them in their possession, the Excelsior Hall lads started back for the school.

"So you don't know what you are going to do next season, eh, Joe?" asked Tom, as he and his chum were riding back. "I thought you'd stick on here."

"Well, I'd like to, first rate but I don't know how dad's business is going to be since this second robbery. I may have to leave school."

"Oh, I hope not. So they haven't any trace of the missing papers and models?"

"Not according to what I last heard. I'm going to get on the trail of that scamp, Holdney, this vacation, though."

As might have been guessed, there was a big banquet for the baseball team that night. And

such a spread as it was, held in the big gymnasium. Every player came in for his share of praise, and there was so much of it for Joe; and his health was drunk in soda and ginger ale so often that his complexion was like that of Peaches'—red and white by turns. But nearly everyone felt that he deserved all the nice things that were said about him, not only for his share in the victory, but for what he had suffered.

There were two absentees at the banquet—and only two. One was Hiram Shell and the other Luke Fodick. Luke humbly told Dr. Fillmore that he thought it best to leave the school after what had happened. The good doctor thought so, too, for it would have been hard for Luke to live down what he had done.

As for Hiram, he said nothing, but when he knew that Luke had made his confession, the bully, after using harsh language to his former crony, quietly packed his things and went also. He sent word to Sam, at Morningside, that "the jig" was up, and there was a pre-vacation vacancy on the books of that institution.

It was never definitely stated who had pulled down the statue, but the withdrawal of Hiram, Luke and Sam was confession enough.

It was in the midst of the banquet, when Joe

had been called upon to respond to the toast, "The Baseball Nine," that a messenger was seen to enter with a telegram.

"It's for Joe Matson," the boy announced loudly enough for all to hear. "Gee, but he's de stuff; eh? I'd like to shake hands wit a pitcher like dat! I'm goin' t' be one mysel' some day. Here's de tick-tick, sport," and he passed the message to Joe, at the same time regarding our hero with worshipful eyes.

Joe read the message at a glance, and a change come over his face.

"No bad news, I hope," murmured Tom, who stood near him.

"No, it's the very best!" cried the young pitcher, and he showed Tom the telegram. "I wired dad that we'd won the game," Joe stated.

Mr. Matson said in his telegram:

"Best of congratulations. Models and papers recovered. Everything all right."

"Hurray!" yelled Tom, waving the message above his head. "Three cheers for Baseball Joe!" and, when the cheers had subsided he briefly informed his mates what the telegram meant to our hero. Mr. Matson would still retain his fortune, and probably make more money than ever out of his patents.

"Gee! Dis is great!" murmured the diminutive messenger, as he listened to the cheers and watched the jolly crowd of students. "I wish I was studyin' here!"

Joe shook the messenger's hand and left in it a crisp bill, to show his appreciation of the good news the lad had brought. And the toasting, the cheering and singing went on again.

"Now you can continue your studies," said Tom to Joe.

"Yes, I suppose so," was the answer.

"Maybe I'll even go to college.

What were his further fortunes on the diamond I shall tell you in the next book of this series, to be called: "Baseball Joe at Yale; or Pitching for the College Championship." In that we shall see him in adventures as strenuous as any he had yet encountered.

"One last song, fellows, and then we'll quit!" called Peaches. "I want you all to join with me in singing: 'For He's a Jolly Good Fellow,' and by '*He*' I mean Joe Matson—Baseball Joe!"

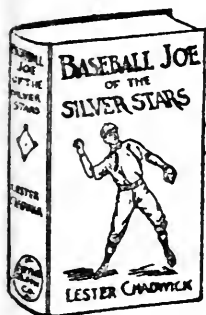
And as the strains of that ever-jolly, and yet somewhat sad, song are dying away, we will take our leave for a time of Baseball Joe and his friends.

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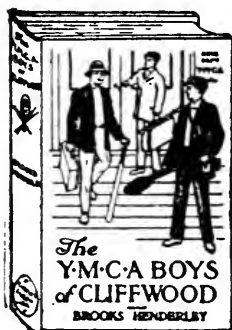
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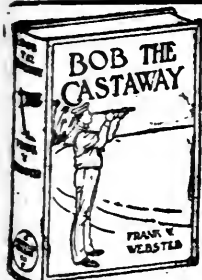
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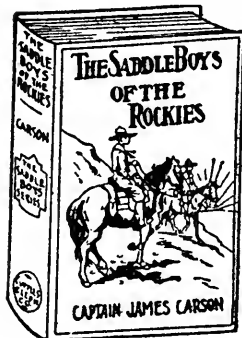
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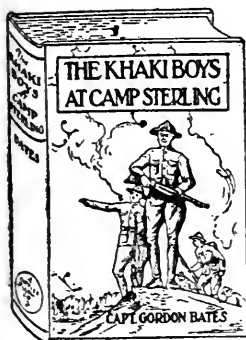
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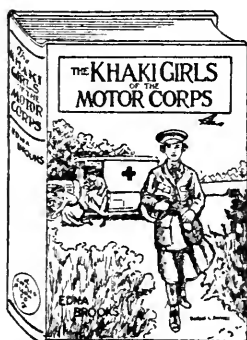
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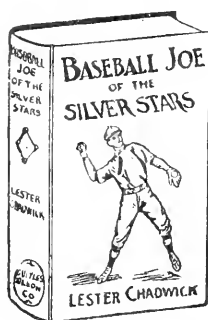
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